

学戦都市

三屋咲ゆう

illustration: okiura

02.

銀綺覚醒

ぎんきかくせい

三屋咲ゆう
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学戦都市
アズラ

02.

銀綺覚醒
ぎんきかくせい

Kirin Toudou

刀藤綺凜

(とうどう・きりん)

KIRIN TOUDOU

「あ、ありがとうございます……」

天霧先輩は優しいですね」



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Chapter 1 - Rikka Garden Council

Located in Asterisk's central district, and conjoining the business and administrative districts was the large building known widely as "Hotel Elnath".^[1]

Although this building was constantly visited by VIPs and celebrities of every nationality, it was best known for something else, namely the spacious dome-shaped hanging gardens which occupied its top floor. The number of people privileged enough to make the pilgrimage here, with its paved, criss-crossing waterways and blooming flowers that paid no heed to the season, was infinitesimally small. Only a small cadre of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation's top brass were able to make their accommodations at this hotel, and only with express permission.

This garden locale, shockingly, was reserved for the patronage of an even smaller number of individuals, who made monthly visits. Those allowed past the gates of this sacred site numbered but six in the world at any given time - the six student council presidents of the six Asterisk schools.

"Good day, everyone. I trust you've all been well?"

Atop a small hill in the center of the garden sat a lone pavilion.

Within the pavilion rested a large, hexagonal desk which mirrored the geography of their city, one of six chairs sitting at each of its sides.

The girl who'd gracefully greeted her compatriots - Claudia - wore her usual gentle smile, as she met five pairs of eyes.

"Welcome, Miss Enfield; punctual as always."

The person Claudia had greeted with a smile was a young man seated to her left, who had the appearance of nobility. Whether it was his fine facial features or his exquisitely-groomed blond hair, he was a most handsome youth. His cool and steady demeanor and actions spoke of a maturity beyond his years.

He wore a light smile, which seemed gentle, but in truth, was the same as Claudia's - a smile which hid all emotion behind an unchanging facade.

The distinctive white uniform which set him apart as a student of St. Garrardsworth Academy fit him precisely, as if tailored specifically for him.

"Now that everyone's arrived, let's begin. Everyone's time is most precious, after all."

As the blond youth spoke, he opened a window mid-air.

This was the monthly meeting held by the six student council presidents of Asterisk. As the hanging garden locale played host to this meeting, it was more commonly known as the "Rikka Garden Council".

On the surface, the goal of this meeting was to maintain friendly relationships between the six schools, encourage cooperation, and discuss items concerning the Festa. The truth of the matter was that this meeting played center stage for a match of wits and intrigue, as the schools sought to wrestle intel from, and advantage over, their opponents.

By custom, the chair of each session was the student council president of the top ranked school of the last Festa season.

"Oh my..."

Claudia turned her gaze to the empty seat at her right.

Originally, this was the designated seat of the representative of Queen Veil. It was, however, currently unoccupied.^[2]

"If I recall correctly, is she not currently in Europe? Apparently she received some sort of request, as was the case previously."

"I see. She is truly worthy of her reputation as a renowned songstress; she seems most busy."

"Heh. If it's that woman, whether she's here or not doesn't make an ounce of difference."

This mocking, irritated voice came from opposite the blond haired youth.

Its owner was a short, slightly plump fellow with pale red hair. His arms were arrogantly folded, and distaste colored his face. This young man, too, was as ever, though at least on this occasion, his scorn wasn't directed at Claudia.

As if his uniform, which marked him as belonging to Le Wolfe, weren't intimidating enough, he radiated a decidedly unsettling aura.

"Please control yourself, representative of the twin swords. This is not the place for you to insult other schools with your words."

A displeased expression appeared on the face of the blond-haired youth as he sternly rebuked his red-haired peer.

"Insult? What insult? This is simply common knowledge. That Queen Veil slut hasn't bothered with a single one of her responsibilities. Since she first took her place as head of the student council there, how many times has she been absent already? Why don't you do your job and supervise her better?"

"Haha...your words are as vulgar as ever. I understand, forgive me this once."

The blond-haired youth sighed heavily.

His answer failed to appease the red-haired young man, who continued unabated.

"Whatever. When it comes to a half-assed representative who was only chosen for their looks, saying anything's a waste of effort."

Suddenly, a pure white sword pressed up against his neck.

"Would you kindly cease your utterances?"

The blond-haired youth forced a smooth smile, one hand holding his sword.

Claudia gave an unconscious gasp of admiration.

He'd drawn his Lux, activated it, and targeted his opponent all in one smooth, graceful motion.

And with such speed!

"...Hoho, now this is interesting. If you've got the guts for it, why don't you go ahead and try, Holy Knight-dono? Go ahead and sign your school's death warrant."

Not only had the red-haired youth not so much as raised an eyebrow, he continued to provoke his opponent further.

To be sure, if he instigated a violent incident of his own accord here, at the Rikka Garden Council, not only the blond-haired young man, but the school he belonged to, would not emerge unscathed.

"It's as you say."

Utterly undaunted, the blond-haired youth gave a bright and unworried laugh, and pressed his sword yet farther forward.

The white blade began to glow with a soft light. It would soon pierce through its target.

-However.

"Hmph. A parlor trick."

Completely unaffected, the red-haired young man scoffed.

Looking closely, not a drop of blood tainted the white blade's purity.

"My, such wonderful friends, as always. You guys never do seem to tire of this, do you?"

This new voice came from a young woman seated at the blond-haired youth's left.

That said, perhaps "young girl" was a more appropriate description. Her hair was tied into pigtails with butterfly clips, and her face was alight with the smile of youthful innocence. The calm steadiness with which she acted, though, belied her age.

Upon her chest was an object which glittered brilliantly, the "Yellow Dragon" of the World Dragon Seventh Institute.

"However, would you mind culling the theatrics, you brats? Otherwise, I'd be more than happy to join in on the fun."

As the young girl spoke gleefully, the blond-haired youth sighed a second time, and withdrew his sword - St. Garrardsworth's prided Ogre Lux "White Refiner", as his red-haired compatriot licked his lips.

"Fufu, well if the princess herself decides to step in, there's nothing else we can do."

Claudia laughed behind her hand as the blond-haired youth shrugged.

The red-haired youth frowned, vexed, taking his legs off the table and turning to face Claudia.

"That reminds me, I recently heard some pretty interesting rumors, Claudia."

In his eyes could be seen a rabid ferocity.

"Apparently Seidokan and Allekant have announced a joint Ogre Lux research effort. Just how credible are these rumors?"

"Hmm...?"

"Hoho~"

The blond-haired youth and the young girl turned to Claudia, their curiosity written on their faces.

"Oh my. How should I put this...word sure travels fast."

"In other words, it's true?"

"It's only because you already knew it to be so that you broached the topic, no?"

Claudia narrowed her eyes and covered her mouth.

Of all those seated around the table, this red-haired young man was the most dangerous.

When it came to the blond-haired youth and the young girl who had attained such heights relying solely on their own power, their strength was definitely something to be reckoned with. However, of those present, the one most troublesome to deal with was the red-haired youth.

In all of Le Wolfe's history, he was the first to have ever attained his rank without having participated in the Festa.

His weapons were his knowledge and the cunning with which he employed it. Strength, charisma, popularity, character; there wasn't a single area where he stood out from among the masses but one - the ability to manipulate others, of which he possessed a degree of talent which seemed a gift from the devil himself.

Every living creature on this Earth possessed a dark side - what his was like was too terrifying to imagine.

"However, this is strictly between our Seidokan and Allekant Academies; it is no concern of any other's."

"Not so fast, you vixen. Secret pacts between schools are prohibited by the Stella Carta. Did you really think the other schools would just idly stand by and watch?"

The young man glanced around the table.

"I have to say, this is truly most miraculous. Although I don't know the specifics, and you don't seem inclined to enlighten us, but isn't Allekant's ideology that strength is primary?" the blond-haired youth smiled lightly, and interjected.

When it came to Ogre Lux research, Allekant held the top spot entirely uncontested. Numbers two and three weren't even close.

For other schools to request a cooperative effort was entirely meaningless.

"How should I put this? Allekant's Ogre Lux facilities are the only one in existence among the six schools. Including my own, the other schools must rely on the table scraps fed by our masters, the Integrated Enterprise Foundation."

"That's right, that's we at Seidokan are providing skilled individuals to Allekant, thus forming a collaborative undertaking."

These words were shocking. All around the table eyes opened wide.

"Hey, hey. This so-called 'collaborative undertaking' is really one-sided, isn't it?"

"It's not just that; doesn't that completely pave the way for the stealing of relevant technologies?"

"Allekant sure is generous."

Claudia, entirely unruffled, maintained her smile.

"Perhaps it's best that we not listen only to my side of the story. Care to share, Allekant-san?"

All eyes turned to the student seated directly opposite Claudia.

The youth, who had simply sat up straight and hadn't so much as uttered a word prior, cut a sorry figure as he shook his head pitifully.

"I don't know the details either. I just scanned the approval request briefly. That is, when it comes to the specifics..."

Whether it was his average physique, his small eyes or black hair, he was a thoroughly unremarkable individual. He was like a shadow, a being without presence.

Nevertheless, glittering on his chest for all to see was the emblem of wisdom, Allekant's "Dusk Owl".^[3]

"You don't know...? Is that supposed to be some sort of joke?"

"It's..."

The small-eyed youth clutched his head in discomfort.

"If this was the decision that Allekant's students made themselves, then you've willingly allowed them to usurp your authority. Is that really alright?"

Although the six schools all boasted their own unique characteristics, Allekant Academy in particular stood out for its many peculiar workings. Like other schools, they offered classes which allowed students to research and development weapons for battle, as well as classes which offered first-hand experience employing the fruits of such labors. Unlike other schools, however, the former far outnumbered the latter.

Furthermore, the school was split into factions, divided by research area, which were engaged in a vicious power struggle. The relative influence of the various factions waxed and waned in accordance with the results their research produced in the Festa.

In other words, the most powerful individual at Allekant Academy was the leader of the faction with the most influence at the time. The student council president, in contrast, was at most only capable of acting as a go-between for the competing groups.

He was, in essence, nothing more than a figurehead.

"Well, this..."

"Please don't misunderstand, everyone. Nothing about this is secret. This is an official collaboration between Seidokan and Allekant Academies built upon a foundation of mutual exchange. Afterwards, at a more appropriate time, I will disclose a more detailed description of our joint effort with everyone."

As Claudia provided a way out, the small-eyed young man gasped in relief.

"At the very least, this is a 'mutual' effort, no?"

"Of course. As part of our agreement, we will be footing 70% of all research costs incurred by Allekant during this undertaking."

At that moment, the young girl cut in in a seemingly innocent tone.

"More importantly, that reminds me. I heard there was some sort of disturbance over there at Seidokan? Even the Shadow Stars were mobilized; perhaps these two things are related?"

"I don't know. Why don't you tell me?"

Claudia's expression never changed as she gave a vague answer.

It went without saying that these two events were, of course, related.

The reason for the aforementioned joint effort was the result of the event from a few days ago - the settlement of the incident regarding Cyrus Norman. Manipulating another school's students to attack their fellow schoolmates was a clear and explicit violation of the Stella Carta. Were news of their actions to spread, not only would Allekant suffer an unavoidably harsh punishment, but their reputation would drop.

Such an occurrence would be of no benefit to Seidokan, however. Instead, Claudia had intentionally kept the matter private, and had demanded the requisite pound of flesh, of far greater value to their school.

"This sly fox sure knows how to play dumb."

Losing interest, the red-haired youth turned away.

According to rumors concerning Asterisk's dark side, Le Wolfe's notorious intelligence organization was second-to-none.

Le Wolfe undoubtedly knew the details of what had occurred. The events, after all, had occurred in their home turf of the redevelopment zone.

Knowing that if given an inch, he'd take a mile, Claudia refused to give him so much as a millimeter.

"If that's all, then let's end things here."

Claudia gave a faint smile, and declared the topic closed for conversation.

"...This is certainly a most fascinating subject, but it seems we're a little late to the game. Perhaps another day-"

The blond-haired youth seemed intent on changing the topic as well, but he was cut off.

"Uh, just one moment. May I speak?"

"He~h, so now it's this one's turn. What's up?"

Trembling, the small-eyed young man raised his hand and spoke with great trepidation.

"U-u-uh, this isn't that, you know, that urgent, but uh, there's something I'd like to add to the agenda."

"Oh, and what would that be?"

All eyes at once turned to the stunningly mediocre small-eyed youth, who glanced around in a panic before opening his mouth, cowering all the while.

"-What I'd like to bring up is, uh, the artificial intelligence being developed by Asterisk, and all matters deriving therefrom."

"Artificial intelligence?"

The red-haired young man frowned in shock.

"Yes. Because of recent advancements in meteoric engineering, artificial intelligence research has taken great strides. Looking a ways off, it's no longer unreasonable to imagine that the day when self-aware AIs are created will inevitably arrive. When it comes to the laws regarding them, however, no nation has made sufficient preparation. We of the Starpulse Generation, for example, just about fell out of the sky. In order to avoid getting caught unaware, we must decide now how we will deal with them when the time finally comes..."

"In other words, you want to allow these self-aware machines to be students of Asterisk? To hold rights equal to that of humans?"

The blond-haired youth followed with a line of inquiry, his face still half-disbelieving.

"Yes, and if given the opportunity, to enter the Festa as well..."

"Are you an idiot? Like hell."

The red-haired youth responded without holding back.

"I have no idea where you've gotten your hands on these machines posing as students, but for them to enter the Festa? You must be joking."

"As my counterpart has said. No matter how you look at it, this is really too much. Even a cursory examination of the problem presents a multiplicity of issues. All of those aside, doesn't the Stella Carta strictly regulate age? With the age of Festa participants restricted to those between 13 and 22, doesn't that mean that the only machines who would even hypothetically be capable of participating are those by now obsolete?"

"First of all, how can we even make judgments on the humanity of something so ambiguous? That should be the first step - making preparations for all those things. I think such provisions are going to prove necessary in the near future."

"What? Everyone's opposed? Bo~ring."

The young girl folded her arms, puffing her cheeks as she glared at everyone.

"Huh? World Dragon's in favor?"

"Of course. Because this way is more interesting."

This representative of the Yellow Dragon would act in accordance with whatever flight of whimsy took her.

Even if she represented her entire school, she placed her own interests as a priority, the interests of her school coming a distant second. The scene falling into disorder, the situation turning to chaos - these were the kinds of things the young girl enjoyed.

The reason the girl was able to maintain her elevated position despite her personality was due to her overwhelming strength.

Each school employed a different method for selecting their student council president. Seidokan, for example, opted for a simple election-based system. Le Wolfe selected their top-ranked student. The World Dragon Seventh Institute, however, chose the simplest and most straightforward method - an elimination tournament.

The strongest of the candidates was given the position of the student council president.

More succinctly, among the students at the World Dragon Seventh Institute, the largest of the six academies, this girl stood at the top, undefeated.

In short, St. Garrardsworth, Seidokan, and Le Wolfe were united in opposition.

On the other hand, World Dragon, and the proposing party, Allekant, were in favor.

"As per the instructions of the Queen Veil representative, her vote is cast with the majority. That's four against, and two for. The measure fails."

"Haa...That's really unfortunate."

The small-eyed youth hung his head dejectedly.

This was, however, the expected result.

If such a proposal were to pass, the only one who to reap the benefit would be Allekant. It never had a chance of passing from the beginning.

Moreover, it's not like the Rikka Garden Council had the final say.

Standing above the Rikka Garden Council was a select group of members of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation who, together, comprised a management committee. If a measure passed, it would later be reviewed by this committee. Although they endeavored to respect the will of the Garden Council, they were under no obligation to do so. There simply no way this measure wouldn't be sent right on back.

-With that said...

"In that case...putting aside the 'humanity' of artificial intelligences, would it still be unacceptable to deploy them as weapons?"

The words uttered by the small-eyed youth, his head bowed, tensed the atmosphere in a single moment.

"And what do you mean by that?"

"Was it not clear? Did we not just decide that artificial intelligences were not to be granted rights equal to other students? Beyond that, didn't we just declare that making judgments in discerning their humanity to be arbitrarily

difficult? In other words, even if they appear to be human, a machine is just that - a machine; a tool, if you would. The Stella Carta has no specific provisions restricting the use of weaponry - no matter what it may resemble."

"...You mean to employ autonomous Replicants as weapons?"

"The Stella Carta certainly does not forbid it."

Such a thing was obvious. Even if remote-controlled Replicants were to be deployed in battle, they stood no chance against the Starpulse Generation. They'd be nothing so much as scrap metal to be discarded.

But, were such Replicants capable of independent thought and action, would that not alter the situation drastically?

"I see. So this was your true aim."

Claudia narrowed her eyes.

The first proposal had been a feint; he'd never expected it to pass. It had been brought up only for the sake of reaching this point.

It looked like this beady-eyed youth wasn't just an ornamental figurehead after all.

"Hmm...I understand now. This is certainly a topic which warrants discussion."

The blond-haired youth sighed for a third time. The small-eyed youth nodded his head deferentially.

"Thank you. Now when I return, they won't just shoot the messenger."

The July sun burned with a searing heat which roasted the skin of those under it. Even as school finished, it gave no sign of letting up.

Ayato, sweating, raced out from within the shaded foliage of the central courtyard.

"This is bad, I don't think I'm going to make it..."

As he thought of Julis, who placed undue emphasis on punctuality, the thought of that oh-so-familiar angry face appeared in his mind.

The reason for his tardiness was unavoidable; their homeroom teacher Kyouko had forced some menial tasks upon him. An explanation would suffice.

After forming a duo with Julis, and registering for the Phoenix, two weeks had passed.

They had diligently trained together each day.

As Ayato had not only never before participated in a tag-team format before, but was also unclear on the various rules of the Festa. The number of things he had to learn had begun to pile high as a mountain.

Truth be told, Julis similarly lacked any team-battle experience, and the two's efforts could only be described as the blind leading the blind.

There was yet a month until the beginning of the Phoenix, though it was hard to claim that this was a sufficient amount of time.

"At the very least, I need to master providing close-combat support. If I can't even do that much, I'll be roasted alive-"

As he exited from the courtyard, intent on passing through the hallway which connected the junior high and university buildings, Ayato suddenly felt someone's presence.

A young girl suddenly appeared, who had just so happened to have been hidden behind a pillar, in his blind spot.

He tried to stop himself, but it was too late.

"!?"

The girl grasped the situation a second too late, and stared in horror.

A head-on collision was unavoidable at this point.

Straining his utmost, Ayato tried to turn.

His body exploded with pain at these actions which far surpassed normal movement, but he succeeded.

Thinking the moment had passed, however, Ayato calmed down-

-Unfortunately, immediately in front of his new destination appeared a young girl's face-

"Huh?"

"Kya...!"

This time, there was no avoiding it. Ayato and the girl slammed into one another.

Fortunately, since he'd tried to cut his speed, he hadn't suffered too large an impact. Unfortunately, however, the other party was just a young girl. Ayato rolled and flipped upright, running to the side of the girl who sat flat on her rear in front of him.

"Hey! Are you alright? Anything hurt?"

"Ah, I'm OK. I'm fine."

Replying in a small voice, an embarrassed smile on her face, the young maiden looked up at Ayato.

"I'm very sorry!"

Ayato bowed deeply, again confirming the wellbeing of the girl in front of him. Establishing that she was uninjured, he patted his chest in relief.

-Suddenly, he noticed something else of note, and tore his gaze away in a hurry.

Because the girl had collapsed with her legs parted, her skirt was askew.

The image of her cute panties was unfortunately burned into his retinas, and he reddened.

"Aaaah!"

The girl suddenly realized what had happened, and frantically adjusted her clothing, her arms covering her body.

Her timid, tear-filled expression was reminiscent of a small animal, although her actions only served to emphasize the full curves of her chest.

This alluring image was hard to bear.

She wore the junior high uniform, and was thus younger than Ayato. Her limpid eyes and strong nose were adorable, and she gave the appearance of a delicate young maiden. She was, in short, a beautiful young girl.



Her silver hair was tied in twin-tails which gently flowed down her back. Those of the Starpulse Generation with atypical hair colors numbered not a few, she and Saya among them.

Her form-fitting uniform outlined her graceful curves, and a real, sheathed sword hung at her back.

"About that...I'm truly sorry. I was too rushed, and didn't watch where I was going."

Ayato lifted his gaze, and outstretched his hand. The girl stared at it with some hesitation before taking it.

She rose, dusted herself off, bowed her head, and gave an apology of her own.

"N-not at all. I should be the one apologizing. I've gotten in the habit of silencing my footfalls when I walk. Uncle is always scolding me about that..."

It wasn't until she gave her explanation that Ayato realized.

He certainly had been in a rush, but realistically speaking, there was simply no way he hadn't noticed someone so close. This was his first time experiencing something like this.

That wasn't all there was to it, either. The reason the two had collided was because they'd both reacted in time, and simultaneously dodged in the same direction. But for her to have such reflexes-

"U-um, might I ask...?"

Seeing Ayato suddenly go silent, the girl was confused.

"Oh, uh, no, never mind. Actually, wait just a moment, something seems to be stuck right-"

There was a small twig infringing upon her gorgeous silver hair.

"Eh...? W-what is it?"

She combed her hair with her fingers where Ayato pointed, but because she was unable to see herself, her efforts were fruitless.

The young girl's demure actions were wonderfully cute, and for a moment, he was tempted to simply observe for a bit longer, but he was out of time.

"Here, don't move."

"Eh...?"

Ayato gave a wry smile and extended his hand and removed the twig, careful not to damage her hair.

"T-thank you."

The girl blushed a deep scarlet and gave her thanks. She coyly bowed her head and went silent.

She snuck the occasional quick glance upward, but would immediately glance back down the second she caught Ayato's eyes.

"HEY-"

Just as he was about to inquire on the matter, a loud roar sounded from the junior high building.

"Kirin! Why're you wasting time over there?!"

"...R-right! My apologies, Uncle. I'll be right over!"

The girl gave a start before giving a second, frantic thanks to Ayato.

"W-well then..."

"Right."

He watched as the young girl ran off toward the junior high entrance where a middle-aged man stood waiting.

His physique was quite impressive for his age, but he wasn't of the Starpulse Generation for Ayato couldn't feel a whit of Prana emanating from him. Although the girl had called him her uncle, it was difficult even for members of direct family to enter these premises. This implied that this older gentleman had his own relationship with the school.

Ayato pondered what he'd seen for a moment before remembering the situation which had led to this very predicament.

"Ah...."

The appointed time had long passed.

Ayato felt a chill run down his back. As he prepared to race off once more, the cellphone in his bag began to ring.

A terrifying sense of forboding ran through him...As he answered the call, to no one's surprise, Julis' furious face appeared.

Chapter 2 - The Dusk Owl's Secret Movements

"Bloom proudly - Flaming Crimson Decapitator(Livingstone Daisy)!"

A chilling voice sounded in the training room as Julis was surrounded by a red lotus of flame.

Circular discs appeared mid-air, spiralling like a whirlpool. Their burning edges rotated at a high velocity, essentially literal fire wheels.^[4]

"Come!"

Dust flew as the numerous fire wheels centered on Ayato. He raised his sword in guard.

Facing that enormous blade, lined with a trace of demonic black, the fiery chakrams came one after another in fiery, merciless succession at a speed the naked eye could not follow. Just as quickly, however, they split, one after another, into halves, their flames vanishing like a candle in the wind.

At that moment, two fire wheels simultaneously attacked from opposite sides.

Silently both admiring and lamenting the precision of Julis' control, Ayato leapt backward.

His movement, unfortunately, had been predicted. The spinning blade above his head flew viciously downward. In unison, three more chakrams attacked from in front as three more came from behind. This was an attack which was intentionally staggered in order to exploit the timing of one's opponent.

Concurrently controlling over a dozen bodies in three dimensions was difficult beyond belief, but for Julis, this was performed with the ease of moving her own limbs. It took a prodigious degree of spatial awareness to pull off such a feat.

Ayato twisted his body, dodging the overhead attack, before spinning in a circle, his sword flying in the direction of the oncoming chakrams.

His intent, however, was not to cut through them, for he thrust his sword forward.

As the various chakrams collided with the blade of his sword, sparks flew, and they left their designated orbit.

Flitting past his body, they left a trail of smoke as they soared past - and nothing more.

"Fuu...."

Ayato heaved a sigh of relief, before again raising his sword, Ser-Vesta - the Demon Sword of the Black Furnace.

"Honestly, you're always like this. Wearing such a nonchalant expression as you make such inhuman movements."

Julis, on the other hand, continued to gape at Ayato in wide-eyed awe.

"I swear, the more I see, the more I can't help but be curious as to what I'll see next."

At Julis' side, more than ten fire wheels continued to spin.

"No, you shouldn't be surprised by just this much, Julis."

"What do you mean by that?"

Julis had barely finished speaking before the chakrams beside her were sent off to attack.

The scene laying itself out before him was a carefully designed formation, a veritable garden of fireblooms.

"I wonder...how's this?"

Answering, Ayato suddenly dashed straight at Julis.

His upper body nearly touching the floor, he dashed directly at the conflagration.

"What!?"

Taken by surprise, Julis' reactions came a moment too late.

Although she urged her fire wheels forward, it was already clear they were nowhere near fast enough to catch up to Ayato.

Ayato dodged an incoming chakram, his goal right before his eyes - when suddenly he noticed.

Julis grinned in satisfaction.

"You fell for it - bloom, Rending Fireclaw(Gloriosa)!"

Suddenly, by Ayato's feet, a magic circle appeared, from which burst forth an obstructing pillar of flame. There were five in total; enormous talons of flame which aimed to jail their intended victim between them.

(I was baited-)

Strega and Dante's powers all carried conditions which had to be met before they could be activated. Accordingly, techniques which could see use as a trap were innumerable; for example, Julis' technique which was even now springing forth.

"Hehe, looks like, this time, it's my win."

From the direction of the inferno, he could hear Julis' self-assured declaration of victory, though he couldn't see what kind of expression she wore.

The claws of flame were even now closing on Ayato, preparing to snap shut the jaws of victory.

Even with the situation as it was, Ayato was completely unworried, and he calmly adjusted his breathing.

"Amagiri Bright Dragon Style, Intermediate Technique <Ten Linked Thistles>!"

Holding his enormous sword with only his right hand, he whirled, severing everything around him.

Flipping his sword to his left in a reverse grip, he spun in the opposite direction.

The flame pillars enclosing Ayato suddenly flashed with two lines of brilliant light before promptly disappearing.

"Wha-...!"

The flames hot enough to broil him alive suddenly disappeared without a trace as Ayato appeared immediately before Julis.

Julis was so stunned she couldn't even move. As her chest was touched by Ayato's attack, a loud sound echoed throughout the training room at nearly the same exact moment.

"Hmph, I thought for sure today I'd win..."

Julis crossed her arms, pouting cutely.

Seated on the floor, Ayato gave a wry smile as he looked up at Julis.

This was the training room assigned specifically to Julis, within which they were the only two people. The ceiling was vaulted, and the room was nearly as spacious as a gym building. This clearly wasn't something available to just anyone - a privilege reserved solely for the Top Twelve.

"Even with things planned out like this, I still can't win. I'm starting to lose my confidence."

"It's nothing like that. I think you're plenty strong already."

"Don't try and comfort me with those hollow words. I couldn't beat you even once today."

Julis puffed out her cheeks as she glared Ayato.

"I'm not comforting you. It's true; that last attack was pretty dangerous."

He'd been thoroughly fooled into falling for that last trap; it was an undeniable blunder. If his weapon were anything but Ser-Vesta, he'd have been done in.

Moreover, the rate at which Julis learned was stunning.

When they'd first begun training together, Julis had been unable to keep up with his movements. But now, she was even making traps based precisely on his timing. Of course, given the short time they'd spent together, her ability wasn't enough to be a serious threat to him, but the gap between them was slowly but surely closing.

"At any rate, you sure have a lot of techniques, Julis. That was my first time seeing that last one."

"Heh, well, I do take pride in at least that much."

Julis expression lightened a little.

Truth be told, her techniques were varied and numerous. Just of those Ayato had personally witnessed, there were more than a dozen types, which included offensive, defensive, and support abilities. This was the proof that she'd completely grasped the essence of her abilities.

"Unfortunately, I still can't win the Festa like this... Let me give you an example. If the Festa were to separate the Strega and Dante on one side, and everyone else on the other, who do you think would win?"

"Eh? The Strega and Dante, naturally."

The Strega and Dante were almost without flaw. The sole exception was that their abilities required the consumption of Prana, which wasn't a limitless resource. Nonetheless, when compared to those without their abilities, they certainly were a force to be feared.

Nevertheless, Julis shook her head.

"Certainly they would win...the first time, but only then."

As she spoke, a complicated expression flitted across her face.

"As such a competition continued, however, the ability users would fall, one by one. Once one's techniques have been seen through, spread and made known, they can be countered. There are always exceptions to the rule, of course, but at best, it's fifty-fifty."

"Countered?"

"The people here aren't stupid. If they knew of my abilities, the least they could do would be to think up ways to counteract my flames. Like Cyrus did, for example."

Ayato thought of the young man they'd fought a few days before.

He'd intentionally prepared flame-retardant puppets in order to deal with Julis.

"I see now. In other words, as a Strega or Dante, it is vital not to allow one's abilities to be known."

"Right. The more specialized one's techniques, the greater their power and the less their general effectiveness. The first time you encounter an opponent, of course you have the advantage. Continue to battle, however, and you can no longer rely on that advantage. Those who stand in the foremost ranks have a very clear understanding of this."

Although she spoke rather casually, but to stand at the top of Asterisk and continue to obtain victory was a nearly insurmountable task. This Ayato finally understood.

"Thankfully, my ability is ever expanding and many-faceted. This much is necessary to see the greatest degree of usability."

"The Strega and Dante aren't the only ones at a disadvantage once the essence of their techniques have been grasped though?"

"That's true enough. It's just that for them, the issue is especially pertinent. Hmm, by the way - how's your body holding up?"

Julis suddenly focused on Ayato's face.

Julis likely meant nothing by it, but as she leaned in, Ayato unconsciously reddened.

"I"

Suddenly realizing the reason for his reaction, she pulled back in a hurry. Ayato averted his gaze.

"Um...well, not too bad, I guess. About the same as usual."

Pulling back a step, the tense atmosphere faded, and he dusted his pants off.

"I-is that so? That's good."

Julis spoke in a deliberate tone which suggested she wanted nothing more than to sigh.

"Hah...It looks like three minutes really is your limit."

"Just about. That really won't cut it, huh?"

"To be frank, it'll be difficult," Julis answered, with an awkward expression.

Julis' training with Ayato wasn't just a straightforward battle.

They were also testing the limits of Ayato's ability to fight at full strength.

If it was just for a short period of time, Ayato was able to forcibly release the bonds his sister had placed upon him. Unfortunately, "short" was the right word; his released state could only last for a few minutes at a time. Moreover, the recoil from forcibly unsealing himself left his body tormented by pain and just about unable to move.

Three minutes - that was the upper limit on how long he could last without suffering the recoil.

"At the very least, I can still fight at a normal level."

"At that level, I'm not sure that 'fight' is the right word. Then again, that's infinitely better than simply collapsing."

When his abilities were sealed, Ayato's strength was below average as compared to the students of Asterisk.

He was capable of releasing his abilities for just over five minutes at max, with the cost of such an action being an inability to move for an entire day. This cost was simply too high for such limited gains.

Julis dipped her head in thought, before slowly raising her gaze.

"Let me double-check something. You are unable to break your seal again in your current state, correct?"

"Unfortunately not. I need to rest for a few hours in between."

Whatever energy he had remaining after doing so had to be used to sustain normal bodily functionality.

"So even if just for a split second...it's not like it's impossible..."

For example, in the fight he'd just had with Julis, he'd only broken his seal for the slightest instant, which hadn't resulted in any undue burden. Perhaps it was better to describe it as having bored through the seal, as opposed to breaking it.

Moreover, the upper limit on time was a hard restriction.

"That sort of life-or-death dodge could at the very least be used in a surprise attack. At full power, of course."

"That's true."

He had just shown this to be the case, after all.

Thinking of life-or-death dodges, he suddenly recalled the silver haired girl he'd run into in the hallway. As he thought of her actions, so much like that of a small animal, he couldn't help but smile.

"It's pointless to cry over spilled milk. Let's figure out how to use your three-minute limit as-is."

"I think that's probably for the best."

"Well, even if it's only for three minutes, but in that state, who could even last three minutes against you? If they were stronger than me, it could potentially be a problem, though...Hmm, we really just need to try it out and see. But just how do we find such a person?"

"Are there really students stronger than you?"

Julis was stunned by his words.

"...Are you serious? No, you know what? Forget it. I already know what kind of person you are."

"Haha."

"Ayato, I'm honestly happy that you think so highly of me, but when it comes to those who are stronger than me...Although I don't really like to say this myself, but there's definitely a number of them if you include this entire city. At the very least, enough that you couldn't count them with your fingers and toes."

"Really?"

Julis was very strong. Although she'd had trouble against Cyrus a few days ago, that was only because of the extent to which he'd laid out traps beforehand. In a true contest of strength, Ayato was sure the fight wouldn't last long.

That said, the ability to manipulate the situation to one's advantage was undoubtedly a kind of strength as well; that much, he wouldn't deny.

"Let me give you an example. St. Garrardsworth's student council president is rumored to be a swordsman who stands at the very height of swordsmanship. From what I've seen in previous tournaments, his abilities are, at the very least, equivalent to yours when unsealed. The student council president of World Dragon is also rumored to be an absolute monster, but as she isn't yet of age to participate in the Festa, I don't think we need to worry about her."

"The student council presidents of St. Garrardsworth and World Dragon..."

Claudia seemed to be the same. As expected, the student council presidents of Asterisk were truly the strongest of the strong.

"Oh, speaking of which. I know of one such person. Last year, it was all the news could talk about for days on end. The reigning champion of the Lindvolus, from Le Wolfe. What was her name..."

Ayato hadn't had the least interest in the Festa, but even he'd seen her in the news. She'd already taken the Lindvolus twice, and if rumors were to be believed, she was posed to do that which had never before been accomplished, and take her third as well.

"-The Venomous Witch(Ereshkigal), Ophelia."^[5]

Julis suddenly muttered in a tone with repressed emotion.

"Right, right."

Ayato clapped his hands in recognition before noticing Julis' strange condition.

Was she upset? Was she sad? Her face was hard to read.

"Julis...?"

As Ayato worriedly called out, Julis broke out of her reverie.

"Oh, uh, sorry about that. I was just thinking about some things."

Julis tried to brush past the issue as she suddenly raised a finger.

"T-that reminds me. Asterisk's students aside, there are many other unbelievable individuals. For example, the head of the Stjarnagarmr - the strongest in Asterisk's history, as well as the most popular Strega of all - our homeroom teacher, Miss Yatsuzaki. She is also undoubtedly at an entirely different level from me."

"Yatsuzaki-sensei?"

"Don't be fooled by how she looks. She's the team leader of Le Wolfe's only group to ever win the Gryps. As for why she's now a teacher at Seidokan instead, I'm not clear on the details either."

Ayato thought of their coarse and disrespectful teacher.

Thinking back, she never revealed any openings. The students who dared to make noise during her classes were always greeted with a punch.

To do such a thing to a student of Asterisk was inconceivable unless one was also a member of the same Starpulse Generation.

"However, compared to our previous example, you do have one advantage. Do you know what that is?"

"Huh? Well, no. I haven't the slightest."

"Your abilities are still completely unknown. The incident with Cyrus was covered up and there were no other witnesses."

That was certainly the case.

"You're referring to our discussion earlier."

"Yep."

In other words, the advantage of surprise when one's abilities had not yet "been seen through".

"The only thing that's been made known is the registration of an Ogre Lux in your name. That much is likely already widespread. From just that alone, however, not much can be grasped."

Julis turned her gaze to Ser-Vesta, which had returned to its dormant state, and softly sighed.

"If only you could use its abilities while in this state..."

"Haha, that's pushing things a little."

When unable to pull out Ser-Vesta's full strength, Ayato's strength didn't even enter the equation for Julis. Of the times when Ayato had revealed his true strength, it hadn't once been while Ser-Vesta was in this dormant state.

"That reminds me, your sister previously used this sword before, right?"

"That seems to be the case."

"How intriguing."

"I think so as well. I never would have imagined that siblings would end up with the same Ogre Lux..."

"That's not what I was referring to."

Julis slowly shook her head.

"Your sister was a Strega, correct? Normally speaking, the Strega and Dante are incompatible with Ogre Lux weapons."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"It seems to derive from a sort of mana interference with the Ulm mana dote. In all of Asterisk's history, the number of ability users who've wielded an Ogre Lux has only been around ten at most."

"Ogre Lux weapons despise ability users?"

Ogre Lux weapons had their own wills, and would choose their own users.

This was something Ayato had already experienced firsthand.

"The reason still isn't fully understood, but it may well be as you say."

Julis shrugged with a bitter laugh.

"Anyway, I digress. The takeaway point here is that until the Phoenix starts in a month, you need to be careful to avoid taking part in any battles, and thus revealing your true abilities. Do you understand?"

"Got it."

His answer seemed to satisfy Julis. She reached behind her, and pulled out her rapier-type Lux, and walked around.

"Alright then, let's start again. You need to learn how to deal with an unranked opponent without relying on your unsealed abilities. If you don't manage to step it up another notch, you might just find yourself cooked enough to be served for dinner."

"...That sounds pretty harsh."

How difficult.

"To be honest, the best would be to practice with an opponent who better matches the model, but that's not something I alone can help with..."

"Hmm? In that case, let's just find someone."

After he finished, Julis glared daggers at him.

"-Are you making fun of me? You know I don't have any other friends."

"Uh, no, I never meant-"

"First and foremost, did you already forget what I just told you? Even if they're classmates and schoolmates, we can't let anyone know what you're capable of. Moreover-"

Just as Julis began to break things down for him, a bell sounded.

A moment later, a window appeared.

- 「You have guests. How would you like to respond?」

As the machine announced their guests, Julis and Ayato traded looks.

"He~h. I sure never expected it to be them."

Julis spoke, her interest plain to see on her face, as she watched the pair of unexpected guests enter the room.

The first was nearly two meters in height, while the other was nearly his opposite - a girl so petite she seemed an elementary school student.

Both stared at Julis with a displeased expression on their faces.

"Saya and...Lester? What are you two doing here?"

The young girl so indicated by Ayato - Sasamiya Saya - stepped forward and directed a finger at Julis' chest.

"Sneaky."

"Huh?"

Julis was stunned speechless by Saya's words.

"Sneaky...? What do you mean?"



"You're keeping Ayato to yourself under the pretense of practice. This violates my prohibition against monopolistic behavior and is in clear violation of guidelines for fair and equitable practices. I demand you do better."

"...What does any of what you just said have to do with me?" Julis responded blankly.

Saya, expression as unchanging as always, advanced another step.

"Don't try and fool me. Explain. Stealing away with Ayato to this secret location after school, and indulging in behaviors inappropriate for normal conversation; I've heard it all already."

"D-don't just calmly make up things about people! We've just been preparing for the Phoenix! Where on earth did you hear that from?!"

"I've promised to keep my source's identity confidential. The most I can offer is their initials - E. Y."

"Yabuki, you bastard!"

What was the point of hiding his name in that way?!

"Furthermore, Ayato wouldn't normally go to a place like a training room. And at lunch, pretending like you just 'happened' to sit right next to him; how fake."

"What!? T-that was really..."

"And for five straight days. That's just too much."

"...W-well, then I have something to say to you as well. Sasamiya, you're always waving around those 'childhood friend' credentials-"

Saya and Julis began to butt heads as they argued back and forth.

"Let's just ignore them."

Ayato sighed, and turned to his classmate, even now forcing a smile - Lester McPhail.

"Congratulations on a complete recovery, Lester."

"...Fortunately the injuries left by that asshole weren't all that severe."

Lester frowned unhappily, but responded in turn.

After the incident a few days ago, Lester had been sent to the hospital. Fortunately, he hadn't suffered any grievous injuries. Although perhaps it was more appropriate to say that Lester's possessed an inhuman vitality?

"So, what brings you here today? You even came with Saya."

"I just happened to run into that midget on the way here. She looked lost, but since our destinations were the same, I brought her with me."

At this point, a piercing shriek came from Saya, who interrupted her argument with Julis to stare in their direction.

"Just who did you call a midget?! Then again, what you said about showing me the way was true enough. Thanks for that."

Saya bowed her head in gratitude for all of one second before resuming her argument with Julis.

In other words, life as usual.

In any case, in order to reach this training room from the match arena, one only had to head straight out of the school building. It was inconceivable that someone could get lost along the way. Saya definitely lived up to her reputation.

"...Well, your destinations were identical after all. Anyway, that reminds me. Lester, what brought you here?"

Lester's frown deepened, and he looked away.

"...Uh, how do I put this? You know, the thing with Cyrus...it's about that. Whatever, I'm just gonna come out and say it - you really helped me that time, and uh, I thought I should thank you..."

Lester turned and bowed his head.

"A, anyway. Thanks! That's all!"

"Whoa, hold up a second! Lester!"

Having achieved what he'd come there to do, Lester turned to leave. Ayato called his name in a hurry.

Although his manner of conveying his gratitude was terribly clumsy, he'd come expressly for that purpose. On this point, he was much like Julis.

Given that they'd gotten off on the wrong foot, he couldn't miss the opportunity to patch things up with the current Lester.

And Ayato thought he knew how he might go about it.

"Hey, just now we were discussing how we badly need training partners. Lester, if you wouldn't mind, would you do that for us? That includes you as well, Saya."

"Training partners?"

"Eh?"

Lester, Saya, and Julis were all astonished beyond belief, and could only stare helplessly at Ayato.

"A-Ayato! Don't just decide things by yourself..."

"The fact is, we really do need someone to help us, and if it's these two, it shouldn't be a problem, right?"

As a participant in the incident a few days prior, Lester already had some notion of Ayato's true strength. Saya, of course, had always known.

"T-that is true..."

After Julis reluctantly voiced her agreement, Ayato turned to the other two. Saya nodded.

"I don't mind."

All eyes turned to Lester.

Left without much of a choice, he finally gave in.

"...I-it can't be helped, I guess."

"I see, so Haru-nee sealed your powers..."

As they started to warmup, Ayato explained their circumstances. Saya, wearing her usual pokerface, sighed.

"So you've finally grown up. Instead of throwing a tantrum like a little child, here you are, taking things seriously. No wonder."

"...I wasn't like that before."

"That said, I don't think that Haru-nee, wherever she is, is the kind of person to have done this without reason. Are you sure you're right about this?"

Saya spoke seriously. This made Ayato quite happy.

"Thank you, Saya."

"Well, this way you can keep up with things. It'll be fine. Don't worry."

"Haha...thanks for that."

The feeling of Saya's hand on his wrist was terribly nostalgic, although noticing the difference in their heights now, Ayato felt a little restless.

"A~hem!"

Julis suddenly interrupted.

"It's about time to get started, so if you wouldn't mind..."

"Ah, right. My bad."

Julis seemed rather unhappy for some reason.

"For them to form a team out of nowhere is asking too much. Instead, since we're clearly divided into forward and rear guard roles, let's do that instead. You two forward guards practice close-combat, and we rear guards will practice providing support from behind. Sound good?"

"...Got it."

Sparks flew between Saya and Julis.

"Those two sure are enthusiastic about this."

Feeling their pressure, Lester activated Bardiche Leo, and spoke.

"Worrying about the girls is fine and all, but you might want to worry about yourself first."

"Huh?"

"From the explanation just now, you can't use your full strength right now, am I correct?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Let me just warn you in advance. I don't ever go easy on my opponent."

Lester laughed ominously, and the words that went unsaid had Ayato in a cold sweat.

"...Please show mercy."

Unable to think of anything else to say, Ayato also activated his weapon.

As the starting bell chimed, Lester charged Ayato. Although he knew this to be Lester's standard MO, encountering it firsthand was decidedly more intimidating.

"Bring it!"

As the axe swung at him, Ayato blocked with his sword - and was flung backward a good distance.

What nightmarish strength.

Even if he unleashed Meteor Arts, he wasn't certain he could block such an attack. In any case, he was incapable of doing so in the first place.

"It's not over!"

Ayato had planned to shift his weight into order to correct his posture, but he wasn't given the opportunity as a second attack came flying in.

As the axehead came soaring downward, Ayato dodged by a hair's width, taking advantage of the gap to charge into his opponent's space. In order to deal with the extended reach granted by Bardiche Leo's long haft, closing the distance was the best option. This was, however, within Lester's expectations, and as Ayato closed, he charged him with his shoulder, stopping any movement.

"Ku!"

The difference between Ayato and Lester's physiques was too much, and as the distance between them opened once more, the third attack came.

"C'mon, c'mon! Don't tell me this is all you've got!"

If this continued, this fight would be pretty one-sided-

Just as Ayato and Lester were thinking the same thought, balls of flame appeared between them.

"Tch. Well placed!"

That technique of Julis' was the Dancing Nine-ring Firebloom(Primrose)The fiery spheres, dancing in midair as if fireflies, quickly found their target and laid down suppressing fire on Lester.

"Fuu...You really saved me there, Julis."

Viewing the scene before him, Ayato began to understand why it was so difficult for Lester to face Julis.

Julis' abilities allowed her to attack regardless of the distance between her and her opponent. For Lester, who wielded Bardiche Leo, this was difficult to deal with.

"Ugh! Annoying as always...Oi! Shortstuff, stop slacking, would you?"

Lester shouted insultingly as he turned to look behind...only to freeze on the spot.

It wasn't just Lester who stood unmoving, either.

Julis and Ayato both stood motionless, their mouths flapping open and closed wordlessly.

"...I'm just about to get started."

The gun in Saya's hands - actually, it was infinitely closer to a cannon - was simply too large to be believed.

Its barrel exceeded two meters in length.

Countless windows appeared around it, emitting light beams as if engaged in Meteor Arts.

"Thirty-ninth form, Lux-type laser cannon, Wulfdora - Strafing Fire."

As Saya unconcernedly shouted aloud, a deep rumble followed an eruption of light.

"W-wait just a moment!"

Hearing Lester's desperate cry, Ayato hit the deck.

Passing just over his head, an enormous beam of light strafed the area.

Catching Ayato's reaction, Julis and Lester similarly leapt for the ground. They made it. Barely.

As the beam strafed past their location, it faded away without a trace.

Trembling, he glanced up. The wall which had borne the brunt of the attack had been eaten clear through as if an enormous caterpillar had wormed its way through it. The walls of the buildings in Asterisk had all undergone a strengthening process identical to those employed by the match arena. This level of destructive power was simply too frightening.

"T...That was way overdoing it! Moron! You almost killed us!"

The first to recover their wits was Lester. He rose and stormed over to Saya, the veins in his forehead throbbing wildly.

"If someone gets hit, it's their own fault for not dodging. If that was the old Ayato, it'd be trivial to deal with."

Saya didn't feel she was the least bit wrong for doing what she did.

Seeing that completely unruffled expression made one wonder what the point of getting upset was.

"Sasamiya, you..."

Julis as well felt like getting angry was pointless.

She could only hold her head in her hands.

"-Oh my, this is quite the scene of devastation."

A leisurely voice floated over from the direction of the new hole.

Sticking her head in through the newly formed hole-in-the-wall was the student council president of Seidokan Academy - Claudia.

"While we do give the members of the Top Twelve these training rooms to practice with, please try and refrain from haphazardly laying waste to school property, OK?"

"...I know. This was just a training accident. It's not like this was vandalism or something."

"That's good to hear."

Claudia laughed and nodded.

At that moment.

"But man, my heart just about jumped out of my chest there, Camilla. I never would have guessed there'd be a hole in the wall. If you want to talk about strange, then this certainly counts. I guess it's just different strokes for different folks."

"Honestly, would you mind restraining that mouth of yours a little, Ernesta? The last thing I need is another incident on my hands."

From through the hole, two girls Ayato had never seen before could be seen standing behind Claudia.

Moreover, it wasn't just that he'd never seen them before. Even for Ayato, who'd only transferred in a month earlier, this was a new sight.

The uniform the girls' wore was not that of their school's.

"-What's going on here, Claudia?" Julis asked in a tone as cold as winter.

It wasn't just Julis either. Lester had also taken a stance and was glaring threateningly at the newcomers. Only Claudia remained undisturbed as she clapped her hands.

"Let me introduce you guys. These two are from Allekant: Camilla Pareto-san and Ernesta Kühne-san."

"Allekant...?"

That made the reason for Julis and Lester's poor attitudes clear.

Allekant was the school responsible for the events a few days ago. For the principal victims of the incident, it was asking too much to expect these two to view them as anything but the enemy.

Taking the long way around, Claudia and the two others made their way to the front entrance, and entered normally.

"We've decided to engage in a joint Lux research effort with Allekant. These two are in charge of planning. They've made their way here in person to finalize the terms of the agreement."

"-Good day, everyone."

The chestnut-haired girl bowed her head as deeply as if apologizing.

She seemed slightly older than Ayato. Her proportions were on par with Claudia's although she cut a tighter figure. She had almond-shaped eyes and wore a tight-lipped, frigid expression.

"Joint effort...is it? I see, so that's how it is."

Julis seemed to accept the given answer even though she was clearly still dissatisfied. Ayato was confused as to what was currently happening.

As Ayato began to ask for an explanation, Lester spoke first.



"Hey, Julis. 'That's how it is'? What do you mean?"

"You're as dense as ever, I see. In other words, this is how they're compensating us for the Cyrus incident. I imagine that in return for covering up what they did behind the scenes, they're going to be providing us with technical assistance."

"What...!"

Lester was shocked.

"Well, that's more or less how things stand."

Claudia continued to smile as sweetly as before.

Although she had technically avoided answering the question, she might as well have.

"Whatever. I did leave things in your hands. This kind of thing is your specialty, after all. But aside from that, why did these people from Allekant decide to visit?"

"Oh, that would be because-"

"Ooh, ooh. That would be because I wanted to see for myself!"

Energetically throwing her arm into the air was the other girl from Allekant. Her name seemed to be Ernesta, and compared to Camilla, her expressions were far more lively. Also in contrast to Camilla, she had a white coat draped over her uniform, though from the sloppy way it wasn't closed, one could get a feel for her unrestrained personality.

She seemed to be roughly the same age as Ayato and the others, or a year or two older at most.

"No matter what, I wanted to see with my own eyes the swordsman who chopped my puppets into pieces," she said, laughing.

エルネスタ・キューネ

ERNESTA KÜHNE

Ernesta Kühne

「ぜひとこの目で見たくつてさー。
あたしの人形ちゃんたちをぜーんぶぶった斬つてくれちやったっていう
剣士くん」

「まったく……
あまり冷や冷や
させないでくれ、
エルネスタ」

カミラ・パレート

CAMILLA PARETO

Camilla Pareto

"Huh?"

"Eh?"

An awkward silence filled the room.

Lester and Julis' jaws had just about hit the floor, the silent Camilla seemed to be thinking "Not again...", and even Claudia hid her expression of surprise behind her hand.

Of course, Ayato was no exception.

This girl had just openly admitted that she'd been the cause of the previous incident. It was impossible not to feel astonishment.

"So that would make you the rumored swordsman. Hmm, I see, I see."

Ernesta completely disregarded the atmosphere in the room and approached Ayato, sizing him up before nodding several times with great feeling.

"Not bad at all, I think. I like him!"

Afterwards, she beckoned the utterly floored Ayato over with a cute wave of her hand.

She shushed him with a single hand as she said in a small voice, "Come boy, come."

Ayato approached her, half guarded, half confused. Ernesta narrowed her eyes, cat-like, and whispered into his ear.

"However- I wonder if things won't be different next time?"

(Next...?)

As Ayato lifted his head, Ernesta suddenly gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Uwa!?"

"Wha...!?"

"...Nn!"

"Sigh..."

Ayato frantically backed away as the expression on the faces of the three Seidokan girls underwent a dramatic change.

"T-this girl! What do you think you're doing...!?"

"...You vixen. Die already."

Julis pulled out her weapon, and Saya aimed her laser cannon - which she had never stowed - at Ernesta.

"Hahaha, how terrifying indeed. There's no need to glare at me like that; it was just a greeting."

Ernesta fled to hide behind Camilla, her face revealing a mischievous smile.

"This is a great opportunity to let bygones be bygones and start all over as friends! To be able to meet not only Swordsman-kun, but the Petalblaze Witch(Gruene Rose) as well is awesome!"

"Even if you hadn't been directly responsible for the Cyrus incident, I despise your school. Don't try and get close to me."

Julis' malice was bared for all to see, allowing one to feel the strength of her resolution.

Reacting with such vitriol to the other side requesting to be friends, it was clear that Julis had some sort of past with Allekant.

"Oh...How unfortunate."

"I apologize, Ernesta, she...well, her personality is pretty much what you've seen. Allow me to greet you all in her place."

Camilla gave a bitter laugh and bowed her head in greeting.

It seemed at least this person - Camilla Pareto - had a rather earnest personality.

Suddenly, Camilla's gaze rested upon the weapon in Saya's hands.

"Hmm, pretty interesting, that. It's a Lux with a lot of personality. It has two, no...three mana dite cores? Its power seems to derive from forcibly linking them together - that design sure is nostalgic."

Unbelievably, Saya's expression changed, and surprised, she turned to Camilla.

"...That's correct. How did you know?"

"This falls within my field of expertise. That said, that design is hardly practical."

Saya's eyebrows twitched.

"The LOBOS method for connecting multiple mana dite cores is an incomplete design already rejected over a dozen years ago. Its power output is unstable, its burden on the user is high, and both its volume and mass are substantial. In order to maintain a high level of output, it requires an excess of mana as well as a significant pause between shots. Moreover, a way to overcome these flaws has yet to be discovered."

Camilla broke out into an unceasing torrent of words, the contents of which Ayato understood not one half, though he at least grasped the main point, which was that Saya's weapon had extreme limitations on usage. To be honest, a weapon which relied on the mana overdrive phenomenon - Meteor Arts, in other words - was something that could only ever see use within the bounds of a duel.

"...That's very true."

Unhappy, Saya bit her lips as she returned Camilla's gaze.

"-But I still can't forgive you for insulting my dad's hard work. Take it back."

"Your father...?"

Camilla took a deeper look at Saya's face.

"Ah...I see. You're the daughter of Professor Sasamiya then?"

Her voice was tinged with an element of both nostalgia and mockery.

"What of it?"

"In that case, I definitely won't retract my words."

Camilla shrugged and Saya's gaze grew sharper.

"Professor Sasamiya is a heretic. He's someone who was chased out of Allekant by my group, the Lion Faction(Ferrovius). Infinitely more important

than raw power is a weapon's suitability with the powerless masses. This is the founding principle of Ferrovius, of which I am the representative. There is no way I will acknowledge that warped thinking of his."

"..."

Saya and Camilla glared at one another, neither giving an inch.

As the situation appeared about to erupt-

"A~hem."

Claudia exaggeratedly cleared her throat as she seized a hold of Saya.

"Now then, our guests, if you would. It's about time we began discussing what we came here for, yes?"

"...You're absolutely right. I apologize for my poor manners."

Camilla gave a heavy sigh and turned.

Then, as if to lead Claudia on, she turned her back on Saya.

"Camilla's always this stubborn! Refusing to budge even the teeniest bit, that's her," Ernesta declared with a gleeful laugh, her face alight with childish delight as she watched the scene before her.

"-Words are meaningless. Use power to prove your point - isn't that the way of things here?"

"...You want a duel?"

"Nyahaha! Not a chance, there's no way Camilla would accept."

Ernesta laughed aloud as she waved her hand.

"That said, we did register for the coming Phoenix."

"Phoenix?"

"If you reach the finals, feel free to demonstrate your point then."

Although Ernesta laughed as before, that act had since ceased to mirror her mood.

"Ernesta, let's take our leave."

"Sounds good to me. Well then, everyone, until we meet again~"

Following the voice which had trailed through the entrance, she bounced out of the room.

"...Seriously, what an infuriating woman," Julis muttered, after some time had passed.

Her expression indignant, she picked up a beverage beside the wall.

"Even if they said they'll be at the Phoenix, no matter how I look at it...aren't they researchers? Were they really being serious?"

"Researchers?" Ayato asked Lester.

Lester answered with an expression that showed he didn't quite understand either.

"Allekant Academy's students are divided into those that research Lux weapons and those that participate in the Festa. Generally speaking, these two groups are mutually exclusive."

"Oh..."

Although the two girls were undeniably members of the Starpulse Generation, it didn't look like they'd undergone any training either. But if that was the case...

"...Ayato."

Just as Ayato sunk deep into thought, Saya pulled him out of it.

"Hmm? What's up, Saya?"

"I'm also going to participate in the Phoenix. I've decided."

"The Phoenix...? Well, that's alright with me, but who's your partner going to be?"

"You, of course."

"What did you say!?"

Julis interrupted her drinking to shout a response to Saya's straightforward reply.

"W-who do you think you're kidding here?! That guy is my partner!"

Saying this, Julis reached out to grab Ayato's right wrist. Saya, refusing to lose, grabbed his left, and pulled him in the opposite direction.

"...Monopolizing him is prohibited."

"W-w-wait just a minute, you two! It hurts! Owwwwwww!"

Even if Gandhi himself were here, chances were good he'd be unable to separate these two girls.

"You should just continue what you were doing earlier, and partner up with Lester!"

"I refuse."

A reply without hesitation.

"I'll pass on that as well! A psycho like her who blows away both friend and foe I can do without! Actually, before all of that, I already have a partner!"

"...Good point. The only person who can completely avoid my attacks is Ayato."

"That's something you should change! Anyway, the deadline for registering for the Phoenix is already past! What're you planning to do about that?"

"Hmm...That is a problem."

Saya released Ayato's arm and began to think.

Julis seized the opportunity to pull Ayato to her, and as if protecting him with her body, took up a threatening stance like a mother cat.

"Well, for now, just sign up as an alternate. Every year people drop out anyway."

"Good. Then that's that."

Saya thumbed up her approval of Lester's suggestion.

Facing Saya, Julis guardedly questioned further.

"...And your partner?"

"Ayato."

"REJECTED!"

Julis and Saya began to quarrel once more.

Ayato sighed, and thought of what Ernesta had just said.

"However, I wonder if things won't be different next time?"

Although her tone had implied it was a joke, he was decidedly concerned.

(What did she mean by "next time"?)

"Honestly...Please try not to give me another heart attack, OK, Ernesta?"
Camilla pleaded with Ernesta, walking before her.

After having smoothly finished signing the agreement, they were leaving Seidokan grounds.

"Hmm? When did that happen?"

Ernesta turned back with puzzled expression on her face. They'd been friends for too long, however, and Camilla wasn't about to be taken in by her pretended innocence.

"The fact that you were responsible for the incident a few days ago...There was no need to make them aware of it."

Camilla was referring to what she'd said back in the training room.

Back then, she'd revealed herself as the mastermind behind the plot, and needlessly put them on guard. There had been no benefit in doing such a thing.

"Whatever. We've just formalized the agreement, so there's no need to worry about it coming back to bite us now, anyway."

"That's true..."

The agreement this time was, of course, exceedingly in Seidokan's favor, so they had nothing to gain by going back on their word.

"First, let me express my gratitude for the assistance of Ferrovius. I mean it. Dangling the idea of developing new Lux technology as bait...they simply had no choice but to accept."

"In any case, it's not like they'll really be able to use what they learn from us, so who cares? If that's all it costs to have the Sculptor Faction(Pygmalion) indebted to us, then we count it cheap."

That was certainly true.

Practical deployment of 'that technique' was something that Ferrovius - Camilla - felt might as well have been impossible.

...'That' belonged to essentially the same system of things as Professor Sasamiya's weapon.

"Nyahaha. In any case, I never would have thought I'd see the day when Camilla would be so openly provocative, and to that blue-haired little girl. Given your personality, that's something unprecedented."

"...It's nothing. Something that small hardly counts as a provocation. I was just expressing my true feelings. Anyway, more importantly, is everything ready to begin?"

"Yep yep, it's all gone very smoothly. The opportunistic Dark Lady Faction(Sonnet)^[6] and Idea Faction(Methusaleh) have been roped in for the moment. That being the case, the Ubermensch Faction(Tenorio) ought to keep quiet for a bit," Ernesta spoke nonchalantly.

With this, they'd taken control of the assembly.

"...You sure move fast."

Camilla had no doubts regarding her own ability. When it came to Allekant Academy, which gathered the very brightest from the four corners of the world, she had the confidence to stand at the head of the very largest faction.

However, when she stood next to the girl in front of her, she could feel the difference between herself and this heaven-sent talent. Whether it was in her role as a researcher or in her role as a leader, it made no difference.

"The President didn't do too bad a job at the Rikka Garden Council; the stage is set, and our people are making the final arrangements."

At last, Ernesta's expression turned dark.

"Is there a problem?"

"You could say that. The drive system's been completed thanks to Cyrus' help. We have all the data we need. The output system, however, is a little unstable. It's going to need more time."

"If he's willing to obediently come over to Allekant, then we can wrap things up pretty soon."

"That can't be helped. He's not like those Strega and Dante that just go wherever they want. Anyway, who'd willingly sign up to be a guinea pig?"

Ernesta spoke quite cheerfully, and even Camilla gave a wry smile.

"Hence the lie? Leverage?"

"Yes. I'll use any method to achieve my ends. It's for the purpose of realizing my dream, after all."

As Ernesta spoke, she raised her head to gaze at the twilight sky.

She'd squinted her eyes as if playing a prank, but within their depths lay a fearsome seriousness. On this, Camilla was most clear.

"When you said you wanted to see him, this was your reason?"

Camilla inquired as Ernesta continued to stare at the sky.

"Mm. You know, when it comes to the Phoenix, I think that swordsman is our biggest foe. So I wanted to see things with my own eyes, confirm things a bit."

"Amagiri Ayato, his name was. The data we've collected seems to be legitimate..."

From their meeting just now, the boy had seemed rather juvenile.

The way Camilla saw it, he was anything but out of the ordinary.

Even if you included the fact that he wielded Ser-Vesta, he didn't seem to be a threat.

"I wish there was more info on him...Mm, I wish."

Ernesta mumbled to herself.

"...Please don't tell me you're plotting something again?"

"This is pretty frustrating, to be honest. I can't use my puppets since they're being adjusted at the moment, and there's no time to go play with another school. Originally, I'd figured I'd do something here, but there's no one else like Cyrus-kun to take advantage of. Moreover, the data measurement terminal should already have been prepared..."

Ernesta spoke without stopping before suddenly raising her head.

"-Oh, that's right. There's still that way."

"Something just occur to you?"

Ernesta nodded proudly in response to Camilla's inquiry.

"The Tenorio, weren't they recently raising a fuss? Something like the incident with Cyrus bringing disgrace to Allekant or something."

"That was just something they said for appearance's sake."

In comparison with the humiliation the Tenorio had suffered four years prior, Ernesta's failure was a minor thing.

More correctly, the original goal of the thing with Cyrus had been to measure the mana transfer efficiency rates at which telekinetic ability users used their abilities. This data had been collected, and thus in regards to this aspect, the plan had been a complete success.

Added to that, it had been Ernesta's own Ferrovius which had paid the cost of compensation. Tenorio hadn't a leg to stand on with their complaint.

"I think we ought to give them a chance to reclaim their honor. That's only fair, after all."

Ernesta, enjoying herself thoroughly, laughed delightedly.

"...What's the plan?"

"If they were able to eliminate the cause of our defeat, then wouldn't that mean that their research's results are superior to ours?"

So that's how it was. Camilla had more or less grasped the plan.

"You're going to provoke them."

"Hehehe, killing two birds with one stone is most interesting, after all."

Seeing Ernesta immerse herself in her new idea, Camilla gave a wry smile.

This was a person who was absurdly reckless, and yet a terrifyingly reliable friend.

For this reason, though she was forced to endure countless hardships on her behalf, she'd accepted it without a second thought.

Chapter 3 - Gusting Wind, Bladed Thunder

"-So, do you know anything about them?"

"Hoho, I see, I see. Allekant is it?"

Lunch break, the next day. The classroom of Year 1, Class 3.

Ayato was questioning Eishirou regarding the two girls from Allekant who'd visited the day before. Eishirou, on the other hand, nodded happily as he skilfully sliced his apple with a dagger-type Lux.

Whenever Eishirou was low on funds, this was what he'd do for lunch.

Even this apple was a gift from his neighbors back home, who'd grown it themselves.

"Information on those two is going to be pretty pricey, you know?"

Chewing on an apple slice, Eishirou exaggeratedly rubbed his thumb and middle finger together.

"...Alright then. Why don't I treat you to lunch and we'll call it even?"

"Great, you've got a deal. Finally, my first good meal in who knows how long."

Eishirou stuffed the rest of the apple slices into his mouth and pulled out his phone.

"Right then, why don't I fill you in while we're on the way? Let's see, Camilla and Ernesta..."

Urging Ayato onward, Eishirou exited the classroom.

Although the incident with Cyrus hadn't been publicized and he hadn't been given the full details on the situation, for Eishirou, the names were enough. Opening a window, the faces of the two girls from yesterday appeared.

"First up is the foreign beauty...Her name is Camilla Pareto, a student at Allekant Academy. She's the representative of Allekant's largest faction, Ferrovius. Her research is focused on the development of Lux weaponry. The team using weaponry developed by her claimed victory in last year's Phoenix. Other Festa participants have also used weapons developed by

her. When taken in sum, her excellent final score during last year's Festa season places her second."

"Wow, impressive."

To be sure, that forthright and perceptive personality of hers screamed of her competence.

"Now then, the other is Ernesta Kühne - the genius of Allekant, the brilliant and well-known representative of the Pygmalion faction. There's not too much about her, to be honest. All that I've heard is that apparently she has quite the peculiar personality."

Wasn't that the truth.

As he remembered the light sensation upon his cheek, Ayato reddened a little. Even putting aside that shocking action, her other words and actions had been just as unsettling.

"Just one thing. When she first joined, Pygmalion was both small and weak. Its due to her efforts alone that its influence can no longer be ignored. She's one to be wary of."

"Pygmalion and Ferrovius, is it?"

"Every school, large or small, has its own internal power struggles. Allekant is something of a special case, though. Split into factions according to research interests and ideologies, they vie over research funding and students to put their efforts into practice."

Eishirou opened another window, which revealed a pie chart.

"As I'd just mentioned, the Ferrovius are the most influential power of the Lux development groups. As you can see from the diagram, their influence accounts for about 50% of the total."

"Pretty overwhelming."

"Although they're certainly influential, they lack a centralized system. Moreover, Allekant's student council wields more authority than they do, and resolutions require a two-thirds majority to pass. In order to ensure those votes, they have to join hands with other factions. In times past, their ally was the Tenorio faction, whose research focused on living things. However, it seems that some years ago, the Tenorio suffered a grave

humiliation and lost most, if not all, of their influence. Since then, their new partner has been Pygmalion."

This conversation sure had gotten complicated.

"Pygmalion...what kind of research do they do?"

"Their research focuses on cybernetics and Replicants."

No wonder.

That being the case, it looked like the person who'd supplied Cyrus with his puppets had indeed been Ernesta. In order to combat Julis and Lester, she'd provided him with specially designed puppets intentionally targeting them. Viewing her as the mastermind behind the curtains of the incident seemed pretty fair.

"So, this is a pretty stupid question, but why does Allekant allow its students to personally undertake R&D? Isn't it better to leave that side of things to the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, and focus on the Festa?"

"Yeah, there's a fair bit of difference there. Mana and Prana research are related - both relate to the Starpulse Generation. To be honest, the majority of outstanding meteoric engineers are members of the Starpulse Generation. Since they all gather together anyway as members of the Starpulse Generation, why not teach them at the same time? That's how Allekant sees things."

"Isn't that a bit much...?"

"Truth be told, when Allekant was first founded, it was rather weak. However, due to the excellent results brought forth by their research, they're now very formidable. Moreover, when it comes to those with the desire to do research, there's really nowhere else to go."

"Is that so? Wait, what's this...?"

Halfway through his comment, Ayato realized he was on a path he didn't normally take.

Having left the high school building, he now found himself headed towards the junior high hallway.

"Yabuki, the cafeteria's the other way..."

"Don't worry about it. This is one of those rare times when you're treating me; why would I go to one of those cheap places we normally eat at anyway?"

Grinning evilly, Eishirou gave Ayato a quick glance.

"Today we're going to dine on fine cuisine at 'Le Meurice'."

"Huh...?"

Le Meurice was a high class dining hall located on Seidokan grounds. It was situated at the entrance to a forest, a ways off from the school buildings. When compared to the Polaris Dining Hall Ayato normally ate at, the prices were three times greater.

"That data was hard come-by. This still counts as pretty cheap, you know?"

"...Oh, well, OK then."

He'd been the one to offer, so there wasn't anything he could do about it now.

Ayato pulled out his wallet to confirm he had enough on him. All the eateries on Asterisk accepted electronic currency, but this didn't suit Ayato, so he rarely used it.

"Hmm?"

"Eh?!"

Eishirou suddenly stopped short. Counting his money in a daze, Ayato almost crashed into him.

"That was close, what's up?"

"Oh, nothing much. I just happened to catch sight of something interesting is all," Eishirou answered, eyes flashing like a young child catching glimpse of a new toy.

Following Eishirou's gaze, Ayato saw two shadows, hidden behind a hallway pillar.

"That's-"

Ayato knew those two.

The girl from a few days ago, who he'd run into in the hallway, as well as the middle-aged man she'd called "Uncle".

They were too far away for him to hear anything, but the atmosphere was strange. Although their conversation wasn't quite an argument, but it was still quite tense.

"Ho~h. Never thought I'd get a sneak peek at some info on Toudou Kirin. I can't let such a good opportunity go to waste."

Eishirou pulled out a small notepad and, without allowing Ayato to see what he was writing, began to jot something down.

"You know her?"

Even though Eishirou had just said he couldn't let this opportunity go to waste, when he heard Ayato, he couldn't help but stop writing, and turned to him with a dumbfounded look on his face.

"...Are you for real?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, the person you're asking about is Toudou Kirin-"

Eishirou was interrupted by a sudden sharp sound.

"!"

The man had suddenly-! Kirin's face was now sporting a fresh red handmark.

"-I told you it's not something you should worry yourself over, Kirin."

"B-but, Uncle, I-"

"I don't remember ever giving you permission to speak."

The man raised his hand to strike her once more as Kirin trembled.

-However.

"-Enough. This ends here."

As the man had swung his arm down, Ayato had suddenly appeared in-between the two, and caught the man's arm.

"Huh...?"

Kirin was astonished beyond measure.

"...And who the hell are you?"

The man frowned, and commanded a response.

He stared at Ayato with eyes both cold and contemptuous, and his voice revealed his disgust.

"I have no idea what the circumstances are that led to this, but you should never raise a hand against a defenseless girl."

Ayato's answer received a scornful laugh.

"Don't make me laugh. Look at all of you, fighting whenever you please, and yet you have the nerve to say such dignified words?"

"It's a competition, not a street-fight. At the very least, it's not just one-sided violence."

Ayato calmly met the man's intense gaze head-on.

The two stared at one another for a while before the man finally shrugged off Ayato's hand from his wrist with a hmph!

"...Hmph. I was just dispensing discipline. This is a family matter; outsiders should stay out of this."

"Family matter...?"

Ayato sized the man up once more.

He looked about forty or so, and even more than from his quick glance yesterday, Ayato could tell his physique was impressive. He was of roughly the same stature as Lester, and thick muscles covered his shoulders and chest. He wore an expensive-looking brown suit.

From his muscled appearance, it was clear that he had both undergone martial arts training and that he was not a member of the Starpulse Generation.

"I am Toudou Kouichirou, the uncle of this Toudou Kirin."

Ayato turned his gaze to Kirin who nodded her head with a look of terror.

"Now that you know, get the hell out of here, brat. Anyway, to you Starpulse Generation punks, a slap is nothing serious, after all."

"Be that as it may, pain is still pain."

His words led Kirin to look up at Ayato.

She opened her mouth as if to speak, but, her gaze wavering, she kept her silence.

Kouichirou, on the other hand, was frowning in open displeasure.

"You sure talk big for some no-name student. You, what's your name?"

"...Amagiri Ayato."

The man pulled out his phone, opened a window, and flipped through it with practice ease.

"Amagiri...Hmph. Just some piece of useless garbage who isn't even on the Named Charts."

It seems he'd looked up Ayato's information.

Suddenly, Kouichirou's arrogant, condescending expression turned sober.

"Hmm...Ser-Vesta, is it? Well, that's something..."

Kouichirou gave a haughty laugh and looked at Ayato once more.

"Alright then, boy. Since you can't seem to stand by and watch anymore, what is it you want me to do?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm listening. Speak."

Kouichirou folded his arms patronizingly.

Ayato hesitated for a moment, before speaking forthrightly.

"Promise me you won't raise your hand against her again."

"Hmph, fine."

Kouichirou took the opportunity to add a malicious smile to his already egotistical attitude.

"-But that's if you win the duel."

"Duel...?"

"Uncle, please wait!"

Kirin responded in surprise while Kouichirou, caring not the least whit, continued to speak.

"Exactly. Is that not the way of things for Asterisk - for all of you?"

"That certainly is true...but you're not one of us?"

It was impossible that Kouichirou was a student.

"Moreover, you're not even a member of the Starpulse Generation."

"Cut the crap!"

Kouichirou cut off Ayato's words with a loud roar.

"Don't you ever mention me in the same sentence as you monsters again..."

Furious to the point where he could no longer control himself, Kouichirou glared at Ayato before turning back to face Kirin-

"Your opponent is her."

He put his hand on her slender shoulder.

"Wha-"

Ayato was so stunned he couldn't even speak.

What on earth was going on here?

"Don't worry - even when you lose, I'm not going to make any demands of you."

"That's hardly the part I'm concerned about..."

Which would be something occurring even before the duel took place.

"Uncle! I..."

"Shut your mouth. Just do what I say."

Facing Kirin, he silenced her with an icy gaze.

"-Kirin. Don't tell me you're thinking of defying me?"

A deep, dark voice which didn't bother to hide its malice.

Kirin's heart and body both shook, and she visibly deflated.

"...No, I never-"

"Exactly. If it's Ser-Vesta, then there's some meaning in victory here. I look forward to it."

Having finished speaking, he turned his back on Kirin, and slowly walked away.

"..."

Kirin, left behind, bit her lips with her head bowed.

Ayato clutched his head.

The sound raised by the disturbance had already caused several students to gather around, who were, even now, excitedly discussing the matter amongst themselves.

Ayato looked to Eishirou for salvation, but there was none to be found. On the contrary, he wore a smile which beamed bright as the sun.

Ayato sighed, and turned to Kirin.

"Um, Toudou-san? I-"

"...I'm so sorry."

Kirin never raised her eyes, instead answering Ayato in a quaking tone.

"Huh...?"

"I...Toudou Kirin, challenge Amagiri Ayato-senpai to a duel."

In response to that low voice, the emblems on their chests began to glow with a scarlet light.

"Wha- Why must the two of us fight?!"

Ayato shook his head.

Kirin looked at him with a sorrowful expression.

"I don't want this either...but I have no choice."

"No choice?"

"There's a dream I want to make happen. Uncle is doing this for me..."

A tone which struggled to suppress all emotion.

And, failing utterly, instead revealed the boundless grief hidden within.

"Please, senpai. Please just take it back, please."

Ayato pondered for but an instant before looking her deep in the eyes.

"...And if I did that, what about you?"

"Me?"

"What would happen to you?"

Kirin looked away as if to escape that searching gaze.

"D-don't worry about me. It doesn't matter how I'm treated."

"-And that's why I can't do what you ask," Ayato responded simply.

Ayato well understood that he was being unreasonable.

To fight against the very person he wanted to save, wasn't that defeating the whole point?

But given what he had just witnessed, that scene of violence, and the words the girl had just uttered, "It doesn't matter how I'm treated", he refused to turn a blind eye and pretend he'd seen nothing.

"Is that so? ... Amagiri-senpai sure is kind."

Kirin gave a faint smile, and then reached behind her to unsheathe her weapon.

"-But this is different. I cannot afford to lose."

In that moment, Ayato felt goosebumps.

Purely instinctively, he opened up a gap between them.

Her expression never changed.

Utterly reluctant, and inches from crying, she nevertheless brandished her weapon.

He'd noticed the first they met, but this was no Lux. Although its design was highly modernized, but this was without a doubt a real sword, and a nihontou at that.^[7]

He couldn't feel the presence of mana, and so she wasn't a Strega. However, in addition to the feeling of being bathed in her Prana, there was something else which warranted taking her seriously.

From Kirin, holding her sword in a combat stance, he could feel an ice-cold, piercing aura as sharp as a razor's edge.

This was an intimidating presence Ayato had never before experienced.

"Well...I can't back down on this either," Ayato muttered as he grabbed his school emblem.

"-I accept your request for a duel."

He gathered Prana within his body before focusing it.

He intuitively felt it - that even at his full strength, he couldn't compete with this girl.

As Prana ran through his body, carrying with it a sparkling radiance, magic circles began to appear around him.

Pain ran throughout his body and took form.

The chains which bound him were forcibly dispersed by the power which swelled forth from within him.

"-Secret sword bound by the prison of stars, release your might!"

The magic fetters which had appeared around him disappeared.

As the restraints which had sealed his Prana disappeared, a wave of power surged forth.

Utterly taken aback by the scene she was being made witness to, Kirin's eyes opened wide, though the tip of her blade never wavered.

"Kirin, don't meet his sword directly. It'll cut right through yours."

As Ayato activated Ser-Vesta, a voice sailed over from behind him. It seems he was aware of Ser-Vesta's ability.

That said, one of Ser-Vesta's primary advantages was that even if you were aware of its ability, that and countering it were two very different things.



Ayato faced Kirin and took up a stance of his own.

(Let's test the waters for a bit with a feint...)

"-My move."



「っ……参ります」
綾斗が短く言った次の瞬間、
綺凜の胸元に白刃が迫っていた。

Kirin had barely spoken before her blade came soaring in at his stomach.

"!"

As he warded off her blow and prepared to open some space between them, the next attack came slicing toward him.

Terrifying speed. Godlike speed.

Ayato frantically guarded with Ser-Vesta, barely managing to divert the strike.

Seemingly intent on avoiding a direct clash with Ser-Vesta, Kirin's blade altered direction in mid-air, and slashed instead at Ayato's right wrist.

Ayato immediately removed his right hand, and grasping Ser-Vesta with just his left, returned her attack.

Kirin lifted her blade upward.

"-Amagiri-senpai, you're very strong. I'm surprised."

Kirin's compliment was heartfelt.

"That's what I wanted to say."

Ayato felt a chill run down his back.

Now that he'd seen her strength for himself, he recognized her speed to be at least on par with his own, if not faster still-

"...This is bad."

The girl's strength was far beyond his expectation. This duel was quickly becoming an impossible proposition.

There was a pavilion located in a corner of the central courtyard. Of all the places on campus, this was Julis' favorite resting spot.

Whether it be lunch break or after school, as long as she had sufficient time, she'd eventually find her way here.

Though recently she found herself spending the bulk of her time with someone else, old habits died hard.

Julis had finished her lunch quickly - after yesterday's argument with Saya, she'd eaten by her lonesome today. Pulling out her phone, she began to scan the news.

"So the user of the 'Holy Grail' has finally appeared...If they appear during the Phoenix, that might be a problem. I'll need to keep an eye on Le Wolfe from now on just for that...wait, breaking news...?"

The palm-sized window suddenly expanded.

"Ah, Toudou Kirin's dueling someone. No wonder, that certainly is newsworthy. Let's see, her opponent is..."

Suddenly, she overheard a burst of cheers.

Looking closely, the hallway was crowded with a mass of people.

"...Hmm?"

Strange. She seemed to have heard a most familiar name being shouted out by the crowd. An ill-omened feeling struck her then.

Splitting the rows of onlookers before her, she made her way to the front.

And couldn't believe her own eyes.

"W-w-wha...?!"

In her surprise, she couldn't even finish her sentence.

The person dueling that Toudou Kirin was none other than her very own partner.

(After agreeing just YESTERDAY not to get pulled into something like this...That moron!)

Julis clutched her head in irritation when she suddenly heard a certain someone amidst the crowd.

Joyfully recording the entire incident with his camera was a young man standing in the very best spectator spot. Seeing him, Julis charged forward and grabbed him by the scruff of his neck.

"What is the meaning of this, Yabuki!?"

"Eh?! Er, wait, what? Oh, it's the Princess."

Eishirou lifted his head in surprise before quickly continuing to record.

"Sorry, but I'm a little busy right now-"

"Give me an explanation for this!"

Julis, threatening, covered up his camera and pulled Eishirou around with force.

"That reminds me, I still haven't paid you back for that load of crunk you fed Sasamiya the other day. How would you like to live the rest of your life as a chunk of coal?"

"...I get it, I get it. Geez. I'll do what you ask."

Eishirou sighed and rubbed the scar on his cheek.

"This isn't really anything worthy of note. This is because of what happened in the hallway earlier...Whoa!"

Suddenly Eishirou turned his body. Julis reflexively turned to look as well.

Before her eyes, Kirin's blade came sweeping by as Ayato dodged by a hair's breadth.

As her sword swung by, barely missing his forehead, his hair was thrown into disarray by the wind created from the force of her blow.

"Fuu..."

"Man, this is just too amazing. It's not even the Festa and there's already this kind of fight happening. Amagiri, that ass; hiding his true ability from us," Eishirou swiped the sweat from his forehead as he said admiringly.

"...That said, you can tell that this won't end well if things go on like this."

"That's certainly true enough. Even if he's the wielder of Ser-Vesta, his opponent's the 'Gusting Wind, Bladed Thunder', after all."^[8]

Eishirou's words were pregnant with meaning as Ayato ducked low, dodging yet another sharp slice.

Ayato took the opportunity to jump off the ground, brandishing Ser-Vesta, but Kirin had already flipped past a moment earlier.

As she came down, she again targeted Ayato, this time with an overhead chop.

Ayato spun away, pushing himself off the ground with a single hand.

Even without noticing the sweat dripping from his forehead or the grim expression his face, it was clear that he was at a disadvantage.

To be honest, Julis could barely believe her eyes.

Ayato had released his seal, and she, more than anyone, understand his abilities in that state.

Moreover, he'd undergone special training each day, and he'd finally grasped the movements of his opponent and her sword. A single opening was all he needed to claim victory.

Kirin didn't seem to be letting up for even a moment, though, even though she held the clear advantage...

"Her weapon hasn't been touched once..."

Indeed. She hadn't once needed to block Ayato's attack with her weapon.

Ser-Vesta could cut through anything, a sword that couldn't be blocked. Furthermore, Kirin held not a Lux, but a normal sword. The slightest contact would be enough.

The terrifying thing was, when Kirin attacked, she completely predicted what would follow thereafter.

Ayato had succeeded in warding off all of her attacks, but each and every time, just before their swords would touch, she altered the trajectory her sword followed without slowing down whatsoever.

"To be fair, Ayato has yet to grow accustomed to using Ser-Vesta. That's a gap that just can't be overcome."

"He hasn't? What do you mean?"

Eishirou's words came as a surprise to Julis.

"I'm obviously unclear on the details of Amagiri's style, but just from watching I can still tell a thing or two. Simply put, his movements are too large. Keeping them more minimal would be to his advantage."

"I see..."

Originally speaking, Ayato's movements were unbelievably quick. The problem was, Ser-Vesta was simply too large. Its destructive power more than accounted for its bulky mass, but when faced with an inordinately nimble opponent-

As she followed his line of reasoning, Julis suddenly realized. She cast a quick glance in Eishirou's direction.

(This guy...he understood all that just from watching?)

Even Julis, ranked fifth in the school, was unable to fully capture Ayato's movements at full strength.

It was likely the case that that was even more true for the crowd of onlookers.

(Indeed, watching from the sidelines like this presented a better perspective as compared to their practices which involved mutual action, but still...)

Were his eyes just that good? Or was it-

"...Actually, wait a moment. There's something more important still - how long has it been since they started?"

"Hmm? Around four, maybe five minutes, I'd say? What's up?"

Julis turned white as a sheet.

Ayato clearly only had a matter of moments left in his unsealed state.

It was bad enough that his true abilities had been taken notice of, but for his time limit to be discovered as well would be a worst case scenario, to say the least.

As she prepared to intervene in their battle, what happened next was, from Julis' point of view, infinitely worse.

"Oh, Amagiri's going for an all-out attack."

Almost as if he'd read Julis' mind, Ayato, who'd previously carefully defended against every attack, completely forewent defense to go on the offensive.

Originally, their encounters had resulted in Ser-Vesta tracing out linear paths, warding off the naked edge of Kirin's sword which would disappear without a trace.

-However, Kirin's movements had grown even faster still.

Stepping nimbly, she slashed in as Ayato stretched forth his sword.

Ayato barely managed to dodge, his torn sleeve evidence of how close things had come.

"Uh-oh, this isn't good."

"If things had simply continued, he'd have lost all hope of victory. This isn't that bad a decision. "

Julis offered this rebuttal, but Eishirou shook his head.

"No, that's not quite right. He came pretty close to losing it just now."

"And that's why it was the correct decision. It gave him an opportunity to see what his opponent was really capable of."

"Well, normally that would be the case."

"...What's that supposed to mean?" Julis asked with a worried expression.

Eishirou showed an evil smile.

"That guy, ever since he's transferred, you've been his only opponent. You guys haven't been keeping count, right?"

"What's your poi-"

Halfway through her sentence, Julis finally realized what Eishirou meant.

Immediately turning back, she watched as the distance between Ayato and Kirin closed even more.

"Haaa!"

A full-powered swing with Ser-Vesta failed to cut anything but the air.

Taking advantage of the opening he'd shown, Kirin countered, sending her sword flitting across his left upper-chest.

Things had gotten far more exciting than earlier.

Originally seeming like it had barely missed him, the nihontou suddenly slanted toward Ayato's body.

"Sh...!"

Ayato bent backwards in a dodge, before immediately recovering his posture-

"Duel ended! Winner: Toudou Kirin!"

Ayato stared in confusion in response to the mechanical voice announcing the end of their match.

It seems he still didn't quite understand what had happened.

Suddenly realizing what had happened, he gazed down at his chest.

"...Oh."

His school emblem had been severed neatly in half.

"Man, he sure fell for it..."

Julis looked up at the sky and sighed.

He'd completely forgotten about the existence of his school emblem, which he didn't consider part of his body.

"And there you go - he's not used to dueling, only to real battles."

Eishirou smiled wryly and patted Julis on the shoulder.

"It's over. Let's go."

Kouichirou expression showed that things had unfolded as he'd expected. He cast Kirin a quick glance before walking back into the school building.

He'd already lost all interest in Ayato.

"Um...R-right."

Kirin sheathed her sword, and bowed respectfully before Ayato.

"About that- I-I'm so sorry!"

She took her leave, running after Kouichirou.

"Ahh..."

Ayato wanted to call after her, but he stopped himself.

The loser had no right to do anything.

This was the way of this school...no, of this city.

"Hah..."

As he gave a long sigh, someone patted him on the shoulder.

Turning his head, standing there was Julis, her face as displeased as it had been yesterday, glaring at him intently.

This time, however, it wasn't through a screen, but in person.

"...The things I want to both say and ask are innumerable, but first - let's leave here. You ought to be just about on the verge of collapse."

Her words were certainly true. Ayato had no choice but to obediently be led away by Julis.

"Oh, and remember this. Once you've settled down, remember these words. I don't care what reason you have - don't ever duel the Seidokan rank one!"

Chapter 4 - Entangled Motives

Trailing behind Kouichirou, Kirin bowed her head lifelessly.

Their current path was restricted for school-related personnel use only.

"-That took rather more time than expected."

The sound of his footsteps suddenly cut short. Kouichirou didn't turned as he spoke in a low voice.

Kirin trembled. She wanted to open her mouth, to respond - but no words were forthcoming.

"...S-sorry, Uncle..."

In the end, she simply apologized weakly.

"I admit he wasn't a very compatible opponent. That said, even if he was the wielder of an Ogre Lux, he was still just some no name not even listed in the Named Charts. To have spent that much time dealing with him...this is going to hurt your evaluation."

Kouichirou continued to stare straight forward, dispensing harsh judgment in an unforgiving tone.

"During the next official ranking matches, you'll be challenged by the #7. Although they use a Lux, but it's nothing like the level we saw today. Take care of it within three minutes."

Finally, Kouichirou turned to look behind him, holding his phone in front of him. On its screen, data regarding the aforementioned #7 was showing.

"Memorize all of this. You need to maintain your place among the Top Twelve this year. That's the first step. Doing so will allow you to cement your position here at Seidokan. The only possible concern is that girl with the gun."

"...I understand."

Kirin, head still bowed, answered quietly.

"Moreover - I've seen your midterm exam grades. To be blunt, they're not great."

Kouichirou opened a new window on his phone, showing forth Kirin's test scores from the month before.

Although her scores were certainly above average, and thus could hardly be called terrible, Kouichirou's expression made his disappointment plain.

"Didn't I say you weren't allowed to take your classes lightly?"

"...Sorry."

Kouichirou licked his lips, and grabbing her hair, pulled her head up to meet his eyes.

"Do you understand? What I want isn't just strength. You need to become the greatest, most unforgettable name in all of Seidokan's history. Don't you dare forget that...!"

He proceeded to grab her chin and glare directly into her eyes with an icy expression.

"You're a useless excuse for a human being whose only redeeming quality is you're a little bit good with swords. That's the setting here. Don't forget, Kirin. As long as you follow my lead, as long as you do what I tell you to do, then and only then do you have a chance at success."

"...Right, Uncle...I understand..."

Kirin's eyes drooped, and she answered in a feeble tone.

"Hmph...If you really understand, then don't you dare defy me again. You don't have my permission to speak, only to act as I tell you to."

Kouichirou shoved Kirin away, adjusting his collar and watching as she tumbled to the ground, never once raising her head.

The disgust-filled expression on his face could only be seen as one observing something nauseatingly grotesque, and not the face of one looking at one's own kin.

"...Right now, the plan is proceeding smoothly. Don't stop for a second, put forth all your effort. As long as my plan succeeds, then you'll be able to realize that which you've dreamt of all this while."

Kouichirou smiled sinisterly, and, leaving Kirin behind, exited by himself.

The sharp sound of falling steps gradually faded into the distance.

"...I understand..."

As Kirin sat on that dusky path, she muttered that same phrase over and over like a broken record.

"-So that girl is the #1 rank, huh?"

"Your disbelief is easy to understand. In any case, just how far does your absolute ignorance of our school's rankings extend? Idiot."

Julis' tone revealed her displeasure with Ayato, lying on the floor with a towel on his forehead.

The recoil from forcibly breaking his seal had given him an intense fever, and thus the cold towel lying on his forehead felt enormously comfortable.

Their current location was somewhere now most familiar, Julis' training room.

Although there wasn't any need to worry about strangers passing by, the large hole in the wall somewhat destroyed the feeling of privacy.

"About that...I'm sorry."

There wasn't anything he could offer as a rebuttal. Seeing Julis' frown tighten and knot further and further, he felt it best to simply apologize.

Given how things looked, it seemed "displeased" was far too inadequate a word to describe her current state of mind.

"So uh, I'm guessing you're angry...?" Ayato asked timidly, as Julis cast him a frosty glare.

"And? Do you know why I'm mad?"

The phrase "where do I start?" came to mind.

"Um - because I dueled someone without asking?"

Best put first things first.

After all was said and done, he'd promised her just yesterday that he'd avoid any and all duels, and he'd already broken that promise. He'd more

or less explained the reasons for how things had turned out as they had, but the sight of Julis, never uttering so much as one word in response, was terrifying in the extreme.

"About that, don't worry about it."

"Wait, what?"

"That man, Kouichirou, was it? That unbelievably egotistical attitude of his... Even if he's her uncle, to treat a fellow human being as nothing more than a tool is not something that can be forgiven."

Although Julis' tone was as frigid as the dead of winter, her eyes burned flaming hot with pure, unadulterated wrath.

"If you'd simply let things stand without lifting a finger, then you'd have disappointed me. If the one who'd passed by had been me instead, the outcome would have been identical."

Those words were anything but hollow. They were her honest, sincere feelings on the matter.

As Ayato realized that she agreed with him, his expression relaxed itself.

"Thank you. That makes me happy."

"Wha...!"

As he openly expressed his gratitude, Julis' cheeks reddened in response.

"T-that wasn't anything worth thanking me over. I, um, I just..."

As Julis blushed, her sentence turned to incoherent gibberish halfway through.

"A-anyway! The reason I'm angry with you isn't that!"

"Hmm...then-"

As she watched Ayato honestly pondering, she sighed.

And, pouting, turned away.

"-The reason I'm angry...is because you lost."

"Eh? But wait, that-"

"I know! Even if you were doing this so she wouldn't have to be treated so cruelly anymore, she's the number one rank! It's just that...I don't know...if it's you we're talking about, I thought you had a chance..."

"Julis..."

He never would have guessed that she trusted him so deeply.

If it was at all possible, he wished he could have meet her expectations.

...But...

"Even you lost...Just how strong is this Toudou Kirin?"

"...I don't want to admit it, but her swordsmanship is superior to my own."

That was the undeniable reality of things.

It was nearly impossible to conceive that someone so timid could possess such exquisite swordsmanship. Both her technique and speed were absolute. In every aspect she was the equal, if not the better, of the unsealed Ayato.

He was unable to imagine just what kind of hellish training she must've undergone.

"I see..."

Julis leaned on the wall and laughed bitterly.

"No, at a time like this, I ought to praise her instead. She is, after all, only thirteen years old - a first year in junior high. On her first day at this school, in April, she challenged and defeated the tenth ranked student. By the end of the first ranking tournament, she'd obtained the number one position. I can only imagine what she will accomplish in the future."

"T-thirteen?!"

Ayato sat up his in his surprise, his expression twisting in pain at his unconscious action.

That flawless swordsmanship was nearly inconceivable. And it wasn't just her swordsmanship. The way she moved, the way she took full advantage of every opening, her timing - everything. In every way, Toudou Kirin was extraordinary.

(Even her bodily development is unbelievable for a thirteen year old...)

As his mind filled with the image of those feminine curves, mature beyond her age, Ayato shook his head to clear it.

"Something wrong?"

"N-no. More importantly, is there anything else you can tell me about her?"

In an attempt to distract the doubtful Julis, he asked a question to change the topic.

Julis frowned once more.

"...You're really concerned about that girl, aren't you?"

"Well, you could say that."

Ayato wasn't clear as to why Julis suddenly looked so irritated, but she nodded nonetheless.

"Oh, just forget it."

Her face still showing her displeasure, she nonetheless pulled out her phone and opened up a window.

Appearing on the screen was information regarding all of the Top Twelve.

The first page of the Named Charts lists the Page Ones, or in other words, the Top Twelve.

"I've already said this before, but there are definitely others stronger than me. If we're restricting things just to Seidokan, there are three 'opponents I cannot defeat' at the moment: you, Claudia, and Toudou Kirin. "

"Claudia?"

For Julis to so straightforwardly acknowledge Claudia was something not often seen.

"I hate to admit it, but it's the truth. She's strong. She is, after all, the rank two."

"Eh...? I-I see."

Even though he'd heard from the person in question herself that she was a Page One, he hadn't known her rank.

"You... Seriously. First, you have no idea who the #1 is, and now you don't even know the #2... It's unbelievable."

Julis shrugged in amazement as she opened yet another window.

"Claudia Enfield. The Master of a Thousand Eyes(Parca Morta). Wielder of the Ogre Lux Pan-Dora which allows her to glimpse the future."

"When you say she can see the future, are you talking about precognition?"

"The precise details are unclear. Claudia is the only person with that ability," Julis replied solemnly.

"It's rumored that she can see several dozen seconds into the future, although that's just speculation on the part of her previous opponents."

"...That's certainly formidable."

Even if it was only a few dozen seconds, but the ability to completely see through an opponent's movements was unparalleled.

"That's why there hasn't really been anyone willing to challenge her to a duel. You too, don't just start a duel for no good reason."

"Haha..."

Ayato smiled wryly as he took his time perusing the data. Suddenly, he noticed something about what she'd said.

"Wait, Toudou Kirin is ranked first and Claudia second, but...you're ranked fifth. What about ranks #3 and #4? They're not opponents you can't beat?"

"I believe I've mentioned this to you before, but the rankings aren't just determined by raw strength alone. Although #3 and #4 - especially the Dante who's #4 - have very powerful abilities, they aren't well-suited for facing me. In a ten-round fight, I'd likely win by the fifth. As for those below me...#7 has an Ogre Lux I'm ill-suited to fighting. Using the same analogy, it'd be something if I could win by the third round."

As Julis reached this point, she stopped flipping through the info on the screen.

"But when it comes to you, Claudia, and Toudou Kirin, it's another thing entirely. If we were to fight ten times, I wouldn't even win once."

"...I see."

"Toudou Kirin has yet to lose since entering this school. In this she's the same as Claudia. However, unlike you or Claudia, she is neither a Strega nor the possessor of an Ogre Lux."

She certainly did not use an Ogre Lux, but rather a simple nihontou. Having witnessed her swordsmanship first-hand, it was clear that was her weapon of choice.

"Even though I'd previously said that the rankings weren't particularly special, that doesn't extend to the rank of #1. To stand in that position which represents the school itself is a fierce and bitter struggle. Even apart from official ranking matches, the #1 is not allowed to turn down duels. Someone without ability would not be able to attain such a position. To have held her spot at the top for three months now, defending her position with just that nihontou; it's unimaginable. For the purpose of comparison, the current rank one of every other school is an Ogre Lux-wielding Strega."

As she finished speaking, Julis closed the window with a touch of her finger.

"Well, when it comes to Toudou Kirin, those are my thoughts. If you're looking for more personalized information, Yabuki's the one you want. I'm not a newsstand."

"No, thank you very much. That was plenty."

Truth be told, that wasn't really what Ayato wanted to hear. If given the opportunity, he'd like to know more about her uncle, but that wasn't something he could ask Julis.

"Alright, let's change the topic to the Phoenix for a bit."

"The Phoenix?"

In response to Ayato's puzzled look, Julis smiled wryly.

"Well, since your ability's been leaked, we're going to have to change tactics."

"Ah..."

His limits were still a secret, but his strength was anything but to all who had witnessed his duel with Kirin.

There had been plenty of people watching, at least a few of which had likely recorded the incident.

"...I'm sorry."

"Don't look like that. Fact is, this was bound to happen sooner or later."

Julis patted his head, bowed in apology.

"If you'd beaten her, then things afterward would be much smoother...but there's no point in worrying about that now."

"If I won, then what...?"

"Well, you'd be #1 then. During the Phoenix, the likelihood you'd be paired with an easy opponent would be rather high."

"An easy pairing...? Oh, that's right, it's an elimination tournament."

Ayato nodded his understanding.

In order to raise excitement for the Festa to a favored peak, tournament organizers spared no effort in arranging the order of matches. Simply put, they'd do their best to ensure that those who would most likely pass the first round were all kept separate from one another.

"Since I'm ranked fifth, that means something. The problem is, you're unranked. After that fight with Kirin, my hope is you'll pick up a name of your own after the news spreads. Page One is a bit too much to ask, though."

"Is that so..."

"For those seeking to climb the ranks, this next ranking tournament will be their last chance. At a time like this, there probably isn't anyone willing to accept a duel..."

Worried about foul play, once partners were determined, all they could do was wait, unwilling to accept duels that might threaten their current standing.

"For now, stay on guard. When there's another opportunity, we'll speak more."

Speaking these words, Julis rapped Ayato on the forehead.

After school the following day, Ayato headed to the entrance of the student service center. His school badge had been destroyed in the duel with Kirin, and so he needed a replacement.

At Seidokan, one's badge represented one's identity, and was necessary for a variety of authentication purposes such as signing the roll. A non-functioning badge was extremely inconvenient, to say the least. This morning he'd applied for another and was told to return after school.

"Just give that directly to the student council president."

The girl at the window pulled out a sheet, speaking in a professional tone.

"Also, please sign here and here."

"So I should just take this badge straight to Claudia then?"

"Exactly. She's currently awaiting you in the student council lounge."

"The lounge...is it?"

Slightly taken aback, he inquired further, but the window had already closed.

There was nothing else to do but head over to the top floor of the high school building.

His body was still sore and ached all over, but the normal activities of daily life weren't a problem. Since he and Julis were currently taking a break from training, he had some free time.

"Everything related to the student council's on the top floor, so there shouldn't be a problem just heading straight there..."

Outside the window lay a vibrant blue sky.

Within the room, the air conditioning had kept the room cool and comfortable, but as he stepped outside, he was assaulted by the heat of the burning sun. It was best to stay out of the heat as much as possible.

Thinking thusly, Ayato glanced around, looking for the aforementioned lounge.

The student council office was surrounded by a mass of rooms which looked very spacious.

Pressing the intercom, Ayato was greeted by Claudia's voice.

『ようこそ、綾斗。
どうぞお入りください』
その声に従って部屋の中へ入る。
と、綾斗は目を疑った。
なんとそこには小さな南国が広がっていたのだ。



"Welcome, Ayato. Come on in."

He entered as prompted.

And doubted his very eyes.

He seemed to have stepped out into the depths of the jungle.

In the center of the room sat an ice-cold pool of water, while the room itself was covered with tropical plants. The walls were now glass, and sunlight filled the room.

Beside the pool of water was a long deck chair, upon which Claudia was stretched out. Numerous windows hovered around her, deeply engrossed in her work.

"...Um, this-"

"Hehe. Surprised, aren't you?"

As he turned to look at her, he froze.

Claudia wore a swimsuit which was simultaneously both flattering and daring. The bikini she wore suited her greatly but was far too provocative, and he didn't know where to look.

Way too much skin had been exposed.

"This was left behind by my predecessor, who'd forcibly had it put in place. Although the costs were immense, but the cost to return things to their original state was similarly high, so there's nothing to be done but to take full advantage."

"I-is that how it is..."

Claudia glanced at Ayato and began to giggle.

"In any case, we're in the middle of a lake, aren't we? There's no need for such a pool, right?"

"Oh, you don't know, Ayato? Swimming in the lake is forbidden."

"Eh? Really?"

"This entire region boasts an extremely high concentration of mana. It's led to some mutations."

The influx of mana after the Ember Tears had led to mutations in the flora and fauna. Its effect on humanity had been the inception of the Starpulse Generation, and naturally, other forms of life had not been left untouched.

Nonetheless, mutants with the ability to pose a serious threat to the Starpulse Generation - and their abnormal abilities, physical or otherwise - had yet to be discovered.

"There haven't yet been any recorded incidents, but rumored ones only. That said, there've been reports of an enormous shadow moving about in the water, as well as monsters in the subterranean levels. It's quite terrifying."

Claudia sat up and waved her hands as if to say "how frightening".

He couldn't feel the least bit of fear from her.

More importantly, the way she waved her arms only served to emphasize her chest even further, which made it awkward to look.

"T-they were just imagining things, I'm sure."

"Hmm...you're more of a realist than you seem."

Claudia seemed delighted. Her shoulders trembled slightly when suddenly she clasped a fist to her palm.

"Right, right, you were here for this."

She handed Ayato a new school badge.

"Yeah. Thanks, Claudia. But um, might I ask where exactly you were keeping this?"

Just a moment ago her hands had been empty.

"...That's a secret."

"A secret...I see."

He was terrified of what the answer might be, and so he let the matter rest.

"I have to say I'm quite surprised, though. I never would have guessed you'd be dueling Toudou Kirin."

"Well, the circumstances didn't allow for much else."

He assumed Claudia already knew the rough details of the matter, so he kept his reply simple.

"Toudou-san's uncle...right?"

Ayato lifted his gaze.

"Claudia, you know him?"

"Of course I do. He's a most troublesome individual."

Having spoken, Claudia rose, and slowly walked toward the water's edge.

Impatiently, Ayato followed after her. She dipped her feet in the water.

"It's pretty comfortable, you know? Do you want to try?"

"No thanks. I'm in my uniform, after all."

"Then just remove it."

"I don't have any swimwear."

"I don't mind. Actually, I rather welcome it."

"I mind! Anyway, Claudia, you-"

As Ayato frantically rebutted her words, she raised a hand to her mouth and giggled.

"Fine, fine, I understand. You want to know about Toudou-san's uncle, correct?"

As she spoke, Claudia's usual smiling face took on a severe expression.

"Toudou Kirin-san's uncle - Toudou Kouichirou-dono, is the operative responsible for the running of Seidokan Academy. He is a member of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation's "Galaxy" and the Head of the Integrated Entertainment Enterprise's 7th Instructional Assessment Office. He is the individual in charge of the scouting-related departments for all of the Far East. The Instructional Assessment Office is also responsible for oversight of our school's students as well as all matters pertinent to our performance in the Festa; their authority is very wide-ranging."

"So he's someone very important, then?"

"Yes - if subtly so. He's a candidate for the elite."

"It goes without saying that this is something he desires greatly. For that reason, he's taken his own niece as a pawn to be exploited. All of her duels and even her daily life are meticulously plotted out by Kouichirou-dono."

"Exploited...So then, Kirin-san's only fighting because of him..."

"What makes you say that? Of course she has her own goals as well."

Claudia rejected him flatly.

"This type of showy method is just Kouichirou-dono's style. To be sure, raising a student out of nowhere to become number one is advantageous to his position. That said, the burden on said student is immense, and were she to fail, his reputation would go with her. Nevertheless, this is the path he's chosen."

"...He sure is confident. Confident in Kirin-san's strength."

Claudia nodded her satisfaction at his words.

"Very good. As always Ayato, you're quite perceptive."

"I did fight her, after all."

"Speaking of which, now wasn't that something?"

Ayato could only laugh bitterly in response.

"In any case, the position Kouichirou-dono seeks to attain is a difficult one to obtain - whether or not Kirin-san fails."

"Why do you say that?"

Kirin's performance was directly beneficial to him; Claudia had just said as much.

"Because Toudou Kouichirou-dono's desires are far too strong."

"Huh?"

"The Integrated Enterprise Foundation will never allow those whose personal desires are too powerful to ever reach the top. This isn't limited to just Galaxy, World Dragon and Frauenlob either, but to all other Integrated Enterprise Foundation entities as well."

Saying this, Claudia scooped up water from the pool with her hands before letting it gently trickle out from between her fingers. The sunlight reflected through the water, glistening brilliantly, and Ayato had to squint his eyes.

"When it comes to the cadre of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation elite, unless one has first undergone many instances of mental adjustment programs, and having thus eliminated all personal desires, only then one is able to attain such a position. For that reason, the upper ranks of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation have almost no desires remaining. The immense power they wield is for but one purpose and one purpose only - the continued existence and prosperity of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation itself."

"...You seem to be pretty familiar with their inner-workings."

Information on the Integrated Enterprise Foundation - to say nothing of its elite - was all classified.

"That's right. My mother, after all, is one such individual."

"Your mother?"

Ayato was shocked.

He'd guessed that she was the daughter of a distinguished family, but he never could have imagined that she was the daughter of an Integrated Enterprise Foundation elite.

Even in comparison with Julis, who was a princess, Claudia was of an entirely different social class.

"Heh. Meetings of the elite sure are interesting. Everyone looks the same; even I am unable to distinguish which is my mother," Claudia laughed.

...No, that couldn't be described as a laugh.

"By the way, Toudou Kirin-san is the daughter of the main family of the Toudou-style. Were you aware?"

Claudia clapped her hands and changed the subject.

"Ah...Well, no, I didn't, but fighting her, I could tell she was a practitioner of some style or another."

The Toudou-style was a currently thriving school of swordsmanship.

Emphasizing spirituality, in order to ensure guidance of the correct path, they stressed the necessity of those of the Starpulse Generation undergoing mental training from an early age. For this reason, they had many students who were of the Starpulse Generation, as well as many dojos abroad. They existed on a scale utterly unlike the Amagiri Bright Dragon-style that Ayato belonged to.

If she was a daughter of the main family, then her swordsmanship made sense.

Claudia sighed and slipped beneath the water's surface.

As smoothly and silently as a fish, she disappeared and reappeared in the center of the pool.

"So Ayato, what is it you plan to do next?"

Ayato wasn't sure where the voice had sounded from.

Nor was an answer expected.

Knowing this, Ayato didn't speak and simply shrugged.

"Toudou Kirin...is it?"

He didn't quite understand why, but he was quite worried about her nonetheless.

Of course, that was due at least in part to the existence of Kouichirou, but he'd be lying if he said that was all it was. He felt a certain kinship with her...but on exactly what, he wasn't sure.

Deep in thought, he was on his way back to the dorms, when he felt something awry. There seemed to be a commotion of sorts, an aura of nervous energy.

"What's going on...?"

Thinking to ask someone nearby, he stepped forward when suddenly the crowd, noticing Ayato, erupted.

"He's here..."

"It's Amagiri..."

"It's him..."

"What on earth...?"

He wasn't able to hear too clearly as sentiments of curiosity, jealousy, pity, and every other kind of emotion ran together.

"...Huh? What's going on?"

Ayato stared at the crowd as Eishirou stepped forward.

His expression revealed his utmost delight.

"Hey, Amagiri. You're late. You've got a guest waiting."

"Waiting? For me?"

"Yep. They're in the guestroom. Hurry up."

"O-OK."

At Eishirou's urging, he sped up, and made his way to the guestroom.

From the impish smile on Eishirou's face, Ayato suddenly remembered having had a similar feeling in the past.

It was like the first time he'd fought with Julis, the moment when he'd entered her room.

Suddenly, a lightbulb went off in his brain.

This could only be-

"Ah...Please, come in."

Knocking on the door, a cute voice came through.

It was as he'd expected. Ayato opened the door.

Greeting him from within the guestroom, sitting on the sofa, was a nervous visage; or in other words, the number one rank of Seidokan Academy - Toudou Kirin.

Chapter 5 - Her True Face

"I-I apologize for my rudeness the other day!"

Kirin rose and bowed her head in apology.

"Oh, no, there's nothing you need apologize for..."

Ayato waved her apology away.

The parlor of the male dormitory was an eight-tatami room, within which sat a leather sofa, and not much else.

The room lacked any windows. In their place, a screen depicting imitation scenery shone upon the room.

"If anything, I'm the one who ought to be apologizing. I seem to have caused you some trouble..."

"No! Not at all...!"

Lifting her head, she stared at him, trembling.

"So then...y-you're not mad?"

"Why would I be mad?"

Seeing Ayato's smile, the expression on her face finally lightened.

"It was just that I couldn't ignore what your uncle was doing, is all."

"Nn...About that, I-I'm so sorry..."

"...Didn't I just say you had nothing to be sorry for?"

As Kirin again apologized, Ayato clutched his head in chagrin.

She was a girl, to be sure, but she was still just far too timid.

(Moreover, because she's so strong, the sense of dissonance is even stronger...)

Kirin seemed ready to burst into tears at any given moment, and so Ayato extended his hand to gently caress the top of her head.

"Ah..."

His hand had practically moved by itself, but as Ayato saw her redden, he quickly retracted it.

"So, what can I do for you?"

"Eh?"

"Don't tell me you came all the way here just to apologize?"

Kirin tilted her head, perplexed.

"Nope, that's all?"

Her answer was as expected.

"Ha...as I thought..."

It seems she was quite observant of etiquette.

No matter how you looked at it, her personality was pretty straightforward.

"Oh, but, that's not all-"

Stopping halfway, she once more bowed her head before Ayato.

"Also...thank you!"

"...Huh?"

Her apology was as he expected, but her gratitude was something wholly unforeseen. He stared at her dumbly, and spoke.

"Thank you...for what?"

"Um, Amagiri-senpai, you tried to protect this completely worthless me from my uncle...Although some stuff happened afterward, but it made me really happy!"

Face dyed a deep crimson, she spoke.

Ayato shook his head powerlessly.

"Hmph. In the end, I couldn't do a thing."

"Even so...!"



As Kirin spoke, Ayato suddenly placed his forefinger in front of his lips. He turned to look at the entrance.

Kirin immediately understood, and holding her breath, turned to the door as well.

Ayato killed his presence, approached the door, and flung it open-

"Uwa!"

The eavesdroppers, leaning with their ear pressed against a door that was no longer there, collapsed like an avalanche.

Ayato gazed at the leader of the group, staring at him with a startled expression. It was exactly who he'd suspected it to be.

"You sure are hardworking when it comes to collecting new material, Yabuki."

"Hahaha...Y-you could say that."

Although he wore a sheepish, apologetic grin, his actions were entirely expected.

Ayato had presumed as much, but that sentiment didn't extend to Kirin, who sat completely dumbfounded.

"...Toudou-san, let's continue this conversation outside. I'll take you home."

"G-got it."

Kirin promptly nodded her assent.

"Ugh, it's still so hot even at this time of day."

The sun was beginning to set, and the sky was dyed a bright red.

Both the streetlights and the signs similarly dyed their surroundings red with their light. It seemed a bit early for streetlights to be on, though.

On this street, utterly bathed in the color of the setting sun, Ayato and Kirin walked alongside one another.

The reddish tint on her face had a somewhat different origin, however.

"Are you alright, Toudou-san?"

"Eh? Ah, y-yes..."

"This shouldn't be the case, but you seem pretty anxious about something?"

In response to his inquiry, she showed a demure smile.

"I-I'm sorry. This is my first time walking together with a male who isn't family."

"Oh."

"My father, he- He can be quite strict."

Strict, was it? Par the course for the Toudou-style main family then.

"Really? I'd heard that Toudou-style training was pretty strict. I guess things are the same inside and out."

"You know that I'm a practitioner?"

"I'm a swordsman too, you know. When it comes to the Toudou-style, which seeks the way of the paper crane, there's no way I wouldn't know."

Kirin's expression brightened at his immediate reply.

"So does that mean that Amagiri-senpai's style is an ancient one?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah; that's right. You sure know a lot."

The Amagiri Bright Dragon-style and the Toudou-style were as different in scale as the sun and the moon; the former infinitesimally smaller than the latter. He wouldn't have guessed that she'd have known.

"When we dueled the other day, I noticed there were times when you'd bend at the waist when taking a stance. That's how I guessed."

Astonishing.

The Amagiri Bright Dragon-style was an ancient style with a history lasting five hundred years since its creation by the style's founder. At the time, swords had been employed in real battle, by swordsmen wearing thick and heavy armor. Because their armor greatly restricted movement, the fundamentals of shifting one's posture to alter one's center of gravity were founded upon the simple motion of bending at the waist.

In comparison, the Toudou-style dated back to the last days of the Shogunate, when swordsmen carried themselves upright and forewent heavy armor. When it came to which was superior; well, at the very least when it came to duels in Asterisk - which took place without armor - then the speed advantage that came from the latter was undeniable.

Given its long history, the Amagiri Bright Dragon-style had, of course, adopted similar techniques for its own, but had integrated, rather than assimilated, these into their own style.

This was what Kirin had noticed.

"Amagiri-senpai, whenever you switch from defense to offense, you always take a step first. When you attack from the front, you always raise your sword first. These are the symbols which mark you as a practitioner of an ancient style. Were this a fight with true swords, there exists the possibility of locking swords - but Amagiri-senpai, you wield Ser-Vesta, which cannot be touched. Which reminds me, that Ogre Lux sure is strong! Just from a quick glance, you can feel how much Prana you pour into that sword. If you could keep that up-"

Kirin's eyes glittered as she loosed a torrent of unceasing words. Suddenly stopping herself short, she reddened, and trembling, pulled back a step.

"S-sorry! I-"

As she recoiled in fear, Ayato could only laugh.

Her actions really were those of a small animal.

He wanted nothing more than to pet her on the head once more.

"Toudou-san, you really love swords, don't you?"

"Y-yes!" She answered his question unashamedly.

Looking into her eyes, he felt a sense of loneliness lurking there.

"...Because that's the only thing I'm good at."

"Stop saying things-"

As Ayato began to speak, Kirin shook her head in interruption.

"No, it's the truth. I'm not smart, I'm a scaredy-cat and prone to failure, even when it comes to my family...But once I take up the sword, even me,

even this pathetic me, can do something. So yes, it makes me happy, and yes, I love it."

"I see."

Her answer had been clear..

Ayato was unable to comment further.

And yet, her will and her actions...something still struck him as being off.

And it wouldn't stop bothering him.

"I have a dream that I'd like to come true; no, that I can't allow to not come true."

"Would you mind sharing that with me?"

"...I want to help my father."

Mumbling as if more for her own sake than his, Kirin responded.

"-And for that reason, you have to obey your uncle?"

He felt his question was pushing things a little, but it really concerned him, and so he cut to the heart of the matter.

As expected, her expression revealed her inner turmoil as she wavered before finally giving the lightest of nods.

"...Uncle is different from me; he's supremely talented. In order to help me achieve my wish, he's provided me with the shortest path to that goal. The position of rank one is terribly heavy, it's not something I could have achieved alone. Uncle...is someone I am extremely grateful for."

"You know he's just using you?"

Of course she knew.

She showed forth not the least bit of surprise, instead revealing a hollow, empty smile.

"He's providing me with the shortest path to my dream, and in the process, benefiting himself. That's only fair."

"...I'm not sure I can see it that way."

Thinking back on the events of the other day, Ayato frowned.

That one-sided violence against someone who refused to defend herself - just what part of that was "fair"?

"Uncle loathes us of the Starpulse Generation."

There was nothing that could be done about it.

She just had to endure, that's all.

Forcing a smile, her eyes explained her feelings on the matter.

"_."

Ayato thought about continuing, but decided to give up.

This was the weight of responsibility that fell upon the loser; he'd already exceeded the limits of interference.

He'd best let things end there.

...For now, anyway.

"Changing the topic a bit, do you mind if I ask you something?" Kirin asked apprehensively.

"Hmm, what's up?"

If she was going to change the topic that openly, then he'd play along.

"Amagiri-senpai, what do you normally do for training?"

"Training?"

That was a strange question.

"Well, let's see. I run in the mornings, and then I practice swinging my sword. After school, I practice partnering with Julis..."

"Hmm, hmm."

Kirin seemed quite intent.

"And when you run, what do you do? Do you follow a certain path? Also, also-"

She sure wanted to know the details.

It looked like she wasn't just changing the topic; she really was curious.

As he answered her in detail, one question after another, she finally showed her satisfaction.

"Thank you. That really helps."

"It's nothing. You sure asked a lot of details, though."

"Yep. There's no wasting an opportunity to learn from the strong."

An utterly guileless smile.

"I haven't really decided what my training regimen should be, and so I'm a little worried... Moreover, I don't have any training partners; I have to do it alone."

"Do you want to join us then? Oh, only if you want to."

"Eh?"

His offer had come as a shock. She gaped wide-eyed.

"I-is that really alright?"

"I have to double-check with Julis first, but I don't see why not."

In his mind, he heard Julis' displeased voice shout at him "Don't just lightly go making any promises!" That said, as long as he confirmed with her beforehand, he didn't think she'd mind.

Kirin's expression had brightened considerably, and she again bowed her head.

"I'm sorry...Even after you've gone to all the trouble of inviting me, but I need to keep my distance from well-known students, especially the others in the Top Twelve - that's what Uncle said."

"Oh, why's that?"

"I have to be careful not to reveal anything unnecessary, he said."

How profound.

"I understand. Well then, would you like to join me for practice in the morning?"

"With you...?"

"My name's nowhere to be found in the Named Charts, so it ought to be fine, right?"

There shouldn't be anything for Kouichirou to complain about there.

"U-um, so in other words, Amagiri-senpai and I, t-training alone together?"

"Yep. So don't worry about it."

Kirin nodded shyly.

"Right then. When it comes to the precise time and location, I'll let you know later on-"

But, first things first, they had to trade numbers.

They could figure out the details later; he wasn't sure what time he'd make it to the girls' dorms.

"Thank you for everything you've done today."

"No, no, those should be my words."

"W-well then, I'll be in your hands tomorrow!"

Kirin bowed at an angle and raced off to the girls' dorms.

After seeing her home, he sighed.

Night had already fallen. A gorgeous full moon hung in the sky, now dyed a deep navy blue.

A slight breeze blew, and the sound of rustling leaves filled the air.

"..."

He felt the presence of something hidden.

He wasn't sure where whatever it was was hiding itself, but its presence was surely there. That said, he couldn't sense any ill-intent from it.

(Where...?)

He glanced around furtively, so as not to allow the other party to notice his movements, while searching for their location.

The walkway was empty aside from his own person.

That left only the shadow of the surrounding trees, as well as-

(Above...!?)

Looking up, a small figure swung down from a branch high above.

The shadowy apparition caught ahold of Ayato's back.

"Uwa! ...Eh? S-Saya...?"

Twisting his neck for a better look, he caught sight of the person grabbing ahold of him, who was none other than his classmate and childhood friend.

"Hah...Don't scare me like that...You just about gave me a heart attack."

Sighing in relief, he complained to his childhood friend like always.

"...Just now, who was that?"

Ignoring his complaint, she grabbed a tighter hold on his neck - in other words, throttling him.



"Hrk- W-wait a sec, Saya...T-that really hurts!"

"...Then answer me quickly. Who was that?"

"E-even if I want to answer-"

"...Oh."

Realizing the situation, she released her grip on his throat, and dropped down off his back.

"Sorry. I got a little caught up and used too much strength."

"*cough* *cough* Don't worry about it. Anyway, Saya, what're you doing here?"

"I was looking for you. I figured it'd be better to have a high vantage point."

"Looking for me? Whatever for?" Ayato asked, surprised by her answer.

"Tag-team partner. I want to hear your answer."

"Ah-"

By tag-team partner, she was likely referring to the Phoenix.

"I'm sorry, but I'm already teamed up with Julis. That's not going to change."

He'd keep his promise.

"...Is that so? I understand."

She openly gave up.

She could be very stubborn, so he'd answered her in earnest. This conversation had played out just like those they'd had years ago.

"Now that that's done with...Just now, who was that?"

Saya immediately returned to the previous topic of discussion.

The look in her eyes seemed a bit restrained.

"That would be Toudou Kirin-san from the junior high division. You probably heard about her on the news?"

"...Ah. The person you dueled yesterday, the #1."

"Right, right."

Ayato nodded and Saya frowned.

"In other words, she's just a first year in junior high-"

Saya glanced in the direction Kirin had disappeared in and then at her own body before patting her own chest.

"...Life sure isn't fair."

He had no idea what she was talking about, but he could've sworn he saw horns sprouting from atop her head.

"There are places where you two are certainly alike."

"...Where?"

"She's here because she wants to help her father. I tried not to pry too deeply, but you two really feel very similar."

"..."

Saya declined to comment. Instead, wearing her typical pokerface, she mumbled to herself.

"Father..."

The next day, in front of the high school building.

Arriving five minutes before the appointed time, Ayato found Kirin already there.

"Good morning, Amagiri-senpai."

"Good morning to you as well, Toudou-san."

Kirin wasn't dressed in her uniform, but in a plain, but cute, set of gym clothes. Around her waist she wore a conspicuous pouch from which her nihontou could be seen.

"Before we begin our run, let's start with some stretches."

"OK."

Stretches made for a good warm-up.

The flexibility stretches that he was normally unable to do alone, he was now capable of with her assistance.

The only problem was, as Kirin would shake back and forth while stretching, her chest would sway as well. He didn't know where to look. Because she was but thirteen years old, the effect was all the more shocking.

Moreover, the contact they made assisting one another with stretching made things slightly awkward.

If it was Claudia, she'd undoubtedly be smiling mischievously all the while. Kirin, however, was completely innocent, the thought of which made certain thoughts run through his mind - thoughts he struggled to rid himself of.

"Is something wrong?"

"Oh, no, don't worry about it."

Perplexed, Kirin tilted her head, which only made his heart beat faster.

Her gym clothes were far more form-fitting than her uniform.

"Ahem. Anyway, Toudou-san, what route do you normally take when you run?"

"Oh, I leave campus and circle around Asterisk itself."

"You go outside?"

When Ayato talked about running, he was referring to short distance sprints. This was something new.

"Sounds good. Let's give it a try then."

"Alright then. I'll lead."

Kirin smiled.

Thinking back on yesterday, she really had the liveliest of expressions.

Although the negative feelings she showed on her face outnumbered the positive ones, the smile she showed now was very cute.

Again he was struck with the impulse to pat her on the head.

"? Are you sure everything's alright?"

"It's nothing, it's nothing. Please lead."

Even if Ayato now felt quite comfortable in Asterisk, he hadn't really left Seidokan grounds. Excepting the one time when Julis had taken him around the city, he hadn't left the campus.

"Got it."

Kirin focused herself and showed a serious expression.

"Oh, before that...Amagiri-senpai, do you use weights?"

"Weights?"

"Right. These, for example."

Kirin pulled out a racing bib from her waist pouch.

Giving it a lift, Ayato found it quite heavy.

It'd be hard for a normal person even to lift.

"When we run on school grounds, we can run at whatever speed we want. That's not the case if we go outside, though."

"Oh, I see. That would be rather dangerous indeed."

When sprinting, members of the Starpulse Generation could overtake even a car at top speed. If they were to put all they had into it, it wouldn't even be close. It went without saying that if they were crash into someone at such a speed, serious injury would result.

When a member of the Starpulse Generation injured someone who was not, regardless of the severity of the injury, they would be harshly punished. That, of course, also included accidents.

"Wearing these serves two purposes: it slows down our top speed and also assists in training."

"That makes sense."

When he was back home, any time he'd felt like going for an extended run, he'd retreat to an uninhabited mountainside to do so. This way of doing things was rather refreshing.

"I also have one for you, Amagiri-senpai."

"Thanks. I'll be borrowing this then."

Putting it on, it was heavy indeed. How effective.

"Alright then. Let's get started."

As she finished speaking, Kirin took the lead and began to run.

Chapter 6 - Evil in the Shadows

"You sure seem to be close to Toudou Kirin recently."

Ayato stood in front of the meal ticket machine at the Polaris Dining Hall, agonizing over his choice of a meal, when a voice floated over from behind. Turning, he saw a girl with beautiful rose-colored hair staring at him with a serious expression on her face.

"Hey, Julis. You here for lunch as well?"

Eishirou had again run out of money and Saya had again slept in, and was even now being scolded by their teacher. It was a rare occurrence when he ate alone.

"Your timing's just right, then. Let's eat together."

"A-are you sure? Even if you say that..."

Giving in to the temptation, she cast a quick glance around before giving a happy nod.

"Alright, I'm gonna go with the chicken curry."

Ayato input his choice into the meal ticket machine, and selected the chicken curry.

Although machines like this one were only rare seen these days, Ayato still liked them.

"And you, Julis?"

"Hmm...Should I get the A-set pasta or the C-set which comes with dessert? Hmm..."

Julis propped her chin up with her hand as she pondered deeply. Suddenly, lifting her head, she turned to Ayato and snarled.

"Wait, that's not what I wanted to talk about! About Toudou Kirin-"

Swinging her arms wildly as she shouted, she accidentally tapped the screen.

"Ah..."

"Eh...?"

~dong~ A ticket came out from the machine which read, "Extra spicy curry".

"Whoa, that's the Polaris Dining Hall's rumored curry; it's crazy spicy..."

"...A-anyway! That's what I was planning on getting anyway! Hurry up. I'll go get us a seat while you grab our food."

"R-right..."

Julis seemed quite anxious to eat, but was she really alright with that? In any case, Ayato went to retrieve their meals, at which point he couldn't help but notice the potent destructiveness of her curry. Outwardly, it looked normal enough, but the smell was anything but.

It seemed to be smoking even; that was probably the best way to describe it. It gave off a scent of danger which instilled in him an instinctive desire to flee.

"Hey Ayato, over here."

Julis waved him over from the spots she'd saved near the wall.

"Sorry for the wait, Julis...Are you sure about this? This thing isn't playing any games here."

Speaking, he placed her tray in front of her and her expression sunk.

"I-I already said it was fine! Anyway, I want to know what's up with you and Toudou Kirin!"

"I'm not sure what you want to hear; we were just doing morning training together."

There wasn't anything to say, so Ayato answered straightforwardly. At his words, her face lost its tension.

"Oh, were you perhaps worried that she'd learn about my abilities? There's no need to worry on that front. It was just a little light exercise, nothing that would have caused me to break the seal. In any case, I'm pretty sure she's already got me all figured out from our duel earlier..."

"No, that wasn't what I was worried about."

Julis' answer didn't seem to clarify the matter in the least. She sighed and shook her head.

"Forget it. Keep doing what it is you're doing. It's fine."

He had no idea what had just happened, but Julis seemed to be okay with things now.

"By the way, Julis. You almost haven't even touched your food...everything alright?"

Looking closely, her plate of extra spicy curry seemed nearly untouched.

Her spoon had been moving, but she hadn't eaten a bite.

"If you can't finish it, just leave it. You can still order-"

"Idiot! That's such a waste!"

That was decidedly not a princess' attitude towards food. This had to be the influence of her friends.

Julis finished speaking, summoned up her courage, and put her spoon in her mouth.

"-!"

In a split second, Julis' face turned extremely red before paling immediately thereafter.

"W-wait just a second Julis! There's no need to force yourself like that..."

"...I-it's not a problem...I didn't say..."

Her eyes brimmed with tears as she answered him in a trembling voice.

She proceeded to gulp her glass of water down in huge mouthfuls.

What part of what was supposed to be "not a problem"?

"...Well, would you like to trade with me then?"

"W-what?!" Julis screamed in shock.

"While mine is spicy as well, it shouldn't be anywhere near the level yours is. If you don't mind..."

Julis sat unmoving, like a statue.

"Oh, I see. It's probably unhygienic to eat something I've already touched, huh..."

"No! That's not it!"

Julis shook her head.

"I-I really don't mind, it's just that-"

Cutting herself off mid-sentence, Julis stopped speaking.

"No, I should say that having ordered this myself, I should take the responsibility to finish it. I can't let this become your problem."

"You're the same as always, I see."

To be stubborn to this extent was almost praiseworthy.

Suddenly, a way to persuade her came to his mind.

"That said, doing things this way, we're not doing our best to understand one another. Aren't we tag-team companions?"

"Ugh...W-well..."

Using the Phoenix as an excuse was a bit sly, he had to admit, but this way, his proposal would be easier for Julis to swallow.

"..."

Julis wore a difficult expression as she glanced at his plate, then back at her own, before finally lifting her plate aloft.

"...T-then...let's e-exchange?" she asked with moist eyes and a timid expression.

At the sight of the current Julis presently before him, so different from her normal style, Ayato's heart skipped a beat.

"...Ayato?"

"Oh, right! Sure, of course."

Seeing Julis' head dip in worry, he immediately nodded and, taking his own chicken curry, swapped it for hers.

"...T-thank you..."

Julis lifted her spoon and began to eat.



If he looked closely, her cheeks were tinged with a faint shade of red, likely a result of the curry she'd just sampled.

(She sure is cute when she's being honest with herself...)

The normally fearless and courageous Julis was indisputably beautiful, but the absolute change in personality she'd undergone was refreshing indeed.

Thinking this, Ayato lifted the spoon to his mouth. A raw, overpowering sensation nearly caused him to lose consciousness. Fortunately, he managed to finish it before their break ended.

The loud sound of boots echoed throughout the long corridor as the brown-skinned girl urgently made her way through.

The current location: Allekant Academy's underground research division - the most restricted and protected location on campus. Not even members of the research division without sufficient clearance were allowed to visit here, let alone combat-oriented students of their school, and especially not outsiders.

As opposed to a school building, it would be more correct to label this place a research facility. White walls and white floors spread out endlessly in an inorganic design which prioritized functionality above all else.

Neither plants nor paintings adorned the walls - it was an atmosphere which declared the irrelevance of all that was deemed unnecessary.

The girl stopped, and verifying her identity against a two-form authentication system which validated both her school badge and her biometrics, input her personal password given by the owner of the room. Only then did the doors slide open.

"Tenorio has begun to move."

Entering the room, the brown-skinned girl - Camilla - spoke.

However, the owner of the room, surrounded by countless screens of data, did not respond.

The room was entirely dark but for the illumination of the screens and various instruments scattered around. Littering the floor were bags of junk food and the broken remains of various toys.

"...Ernesta?" Camilla questioned, astonished, but no answer was forthcoming.

Camilla stepped into the room, tiptoeing around the objects on the floor, making her way to the over-sized chair at the center of the screens, and to the girl sleeping there, resting snugly under a blanket.

"Hey...wake up, Ernesta. What you've been waiting for this entire time has finally begun."

Sighing, she pulled away the blanket.

"Nya?"

Her eyes covered by a sleep mask, a line of drool hanging from the corner of her mouth, Ernesta leapt to her feet.

"Good morning, Ernesta."

"...I wasn't sleeping, I wasn't. I was just resting my eyes, that's all."

Still wearing her sleep mask on her head, she waved her arms.

"...Is that so? Then, would you mind repeating the reason for my coming?"

"Um? Tenorio's movements, correct?"

Answering calmly, she stretched lazily.

"-Are you really awake?"

"Fufufu, whether I'm awake or asleep, I'm just as sharp as ever."

...That was certainly impressive, but hadn't she just admitted she was asleep?

Camilla kept her thoughts to herself.

They'd already wasted enough time as it was.

"Things have already begun. If we take too long, we'll be left behind."

In order to ensure they hadn't missed a thing, preparation was vital.

At the very least, a good vantage point was necessary.

"Haha, I understand, I understand."

Ernesta stifled a yawn and called out her optical keyboard.



Manipulating it quickly, she organized the displayed data. The windows surrounding her disappeared, leaving but one behind.

As the sole remaining window moved in front of her, Ernesta expressed her astonishment.

"Huh? There's someone else besides Swordsman-kun?"

"You'll be surprised when you hear who it is. That's Seidokan's rank one."

Surprised indeed, her eyes opened wide.

"Hoho, well now, well now."

Ernesta's eyes glittered.

"Even if they know, they're still going ahead with it? That is certainly exciting."

"Yes, that's why they're taking things seriously this time."

Camilla reached over to a chair near her, pulled it over, and sat down.

"Or maybe they just have confidence in the results of their work! Swordsman-kun and friends, how are you going to deal with this? Hehehe."

Ernesta spoke as if she had nothing to do with the matter. Camilla frowned.

"So? Who're you planning on baiting next? Don't tell me it's the Great Doctor(Magnum Opus)?"

"There's no way that guy will show himself. For now, let's content ourselves with the downfall of the lieutenant of the Tenorio."

Camilla's answer came as expected, and Ernesta nodded.

"We sure are being cautious, though- well, forget it. This is fine. This all works to the end of the Tenorio in the long term."

"Exactly. Reaching too far will only cause unnecessary complications."

...After all, that bastard would only reveal himself when he felt he had no other choice.

If that were to happen, then all this effort would be for naught.

"...Speaking of which, you sure like to gamble."

"What?"

Camilla gave a wry smile at Ernesta's truly confounded expression.

"You can't just take the safest route. That's what I mean."

"Heh, because that's the only way things'd be interesting."

Although her smile was innocent and child-like, a certain hard-to-grasp callousness lurked hidden there.

Mornings in Asterisk take but a short moment before enveloping the world in white.

The differences in temperature between the lake and the atmosphere made for prime fog conditions. As the sun rose, the scenery would fade like a mirage, granting the effect of an illusionary beauty which entranced all viewers.

Today, however, the fog was particularly dense.

"Good morning, Amagiri-senpai."

Appearing from amidst the fog was a gym clothes-clad Kirin, bowing her head demurely.

"Oh, morning, Toudou-san. Man, the fog sure is thick today," Ayato answered, looking around in disbelief.

This was their usual meeting spot, in front of the high school building.

Of all the mornings he'd spent training here - not limited to just the few days they'd spent together - this was his first time experiencing such a dense fog.

"That's certainly true...I've heard that winter's even worse, though."

"Seriously? Today's bad enough as it is."

A short distance between them was all it took for her to seemingly disappear into the fog.

"Hmm, with the fog as thick as this, running could be a little dangerous. Perhaps it's best we hold hands?"

"T-that's fine with me..."

"Eh?"

Ayato had only been joking, but Kirin had responded seriously. Face bright red, she took hold of his fingers with a tremble.

"...M-my bad; I was just joking..."

"Aah!? O-oh, sorry!"

She immediately released her grip.

Although there had only been the briefest of contact, the slightest sensation of warmth could still be felt on his hands.

"No, that's not what I meant..."

The pair sunk into an awkward silence.

"...Um...Why don't we get going?"

"Y-yeah."

As Ayato offered an escape, Kirin nodded emphatically and began to run.

Their route basically followed the outermost path around Asterisk.

At this early time, there were hardly any people except for others with an identical purpose to theirs. With all the townspeople still asleep, the city was enveloped in deep silence.

The cityscape, drowned in fog as it was, had quite the exotic feeling. Looking out over the water, his field of vision lasted but some few meters, giving the feeling of having truly traveled to another world.

Nevertheless, Kirin, running lightheartedly in front of him, seemed unmoved by the scenery surrounding them.

As they ran along the path, Ayato began to sense something off.

-Something was tailing them.

Maintaining a deliberate distance, it consistently altered speed to keep pace.

"...Amagiri-senpai."

Kirin had also noticed, and letting up slowly, she whispered to Ayato, shoulder to shoulder.

"...Yeah, and they're not alone."

Trading glances with Kirin, he suddenly slowed.

He felt confusion from the presences behind him.

"Four, no five. Five people?"

"Yes...but something's strange."

Kirin frowned in surprise.

"This feeling, rather than 'people' -"

Kirin muttered vaguely as the two pulled to a stop.

It hadn't been planned. There was an obstacle in their path.

"Roadwork? There wasn't any sign of that yesterday..."

Because of the dense fog, they hadn't noticed until just now. The road was sealed off. In front of them, a sign forbade entrance.

"I don't think we can just pretend we didn't see anything and continue. What should we do?"

"This is dangerous. There's some possibility this is a trap."

The presences trailing them maintained their distance and similarly pulled to a stop.

Running into the roadblock, there was still a possible detour. Leading off to the left, the alternative path wrapped around a fence-enclosed park, which had only one entrance.

"Moreover, who knows if they're not already there, lying in wait? Toudou-san, I'm sure you've already thought it through?"

"I can't say I haven't..."

She was the top-ranked Page One, there's no way she hadn't.

"Do you have something in mind, Amagiri-senpai?"

"Nn. You could say that."

What came to mind was Ernesta, but something still didn't feel quite right. In any event, now wasn't the time to be considering such things.

"We could try splitting up..."

"At the very least, then we'd know who their target was."

On the other hand, if both of them were being targeted, splitting up would only work to their opponents' advantage. They couldn't just casually divide up their combat strength.

"You know what? Let's just stick together."

"Got it."

He wasn't sure if he was just imagining things or not, but she sure sounded happy.

"Now then, where should we go next-"

Interrupting him, the presences behind them suddenly took action.

Seemingly unable to wait any longer, they drew closer.

They were now but ten meters away. As they neared, Ayato understood the meaning behind Kirin's words. They definitely weren't human; the feeling they gave off was too different. He wanted to say they were puppets or something to that effect, but he could feel Prana coming from them.

(Are they of the Starpulse Generation...? No, this is-)

What slowly appeared from amidst the dense fog couldn't be said to be an animal.

At first glance, it looked like a tiger or lion, or some other large predatory cat; however, it was covered in hard scales. Its neck was oddly long, like a reptile's, and its mouth was peppered with razor-sharp fangs. The closest thing that came to mind? A wingless dragon.

There were five of them in total. All were clearly hostile.

"What...are these?"

"At the very least, they're not from around here."

Kirin seemed puzzled by these creatures she'd never before seen.

"But still, they're kind of cute, really."

"Ah, yeah...wait, what?"

As Ayato turned back to look at her in surprise, the dragon seized the opening to charge.

"Uwa!"

He immediately pulled a dagger-type Lux from his pocket and activated it.

The light blade burst forth, narrowly diverting the dragon's attack.

The momentum generated by that enormous body forced him down as the dragon lithely spun in midair before landing gracefully. Its movements were like those of a cat.

"You okay, Amagiri-senpai?"

Looking over, it seemed that Kirin had repelled the attack of three other dragons simultaneously.

Moreover, her sword was still sheathed in its scabbard.

"Ah, yeah. It's nothing to worry about."

The dragon raised its front paw as Ayato answered.

From what he'd seen so far, there wasn't yet cause to warrant breaking his seal.

Easily avoiding the simplistic attack, he severed its front leg. What he saw left him in shock.

The severed leg quivered as it dropped, almost like melting syrup. However, rather than disappearing, it turned into a translucent goo.

The dragon didn't seem to mind its injury either, and its severed stump wasn't bleeding. It simply stuck the slime-shaped thing back on, which quickly returned to its original state as a leg.

"What the-"

Ayato was left speechless. The last dragon, waiting in reserve, opened its jaws wide.

The mana in the area began to accumulate at an astonishing rate.

The dragon's mouth began to emit a brilliant light which swirled like a violent eddy.

"No way...!"

This was clearly an ability identical to that which belonged to the Strega and Dante - the ability to interfere with mana.

With a roaring hiss, a fireball burst forth, crashing into Ayato's sword.

It wasn't anywhere near on par with Julis' abilities, but that an animal could manipulate mana was something unbelievable.

"Don't tell me...are these the mutants that Claudia was talking about...?"

On second thought, that couldn't be it. Had mutants like these been discovered, the news would have long since spread around the world.

Even here in Asterisk, where defying common sense was an integral part of daily life, the thing standing before him was simply too absurd.

Two other dragons howled and drew near.

"I don't like to take life, but I don't think I have a choice."

Even if he'd prefer to be a little more lenient, but he still wasn't clear on the true nature of the beings before him.

Standing amid the fog, he brandished his sword and controlled his breathing.

Focusing his Prana, and raising it, he released his strength.

As the two dragons simultaneously took a step forward to catch him in a pincer attack-

"Amagiri Bright Dragon Style, Beginning Technique <Four Wasps>!"

As fast as lightning, Ayato twirled outward, and twisted his wrist, stabbing his sword forward with one arm.

"Uoooooooooooooh!"

A brutal cry erupted, utterly unlike any animal ever before heard, as the two dragons were simultaneously skewered.

In the following instant, the dragons melted into goo, just like the front leg had a moment earlier.

Exhibiting an unbelievable degree of intelligence, they slithered across the ground to open some distance, and within the next ten seconds had fully recovered.

Ayato didn't know what to think of the situation.

"There's no way they're actually immortal, right?"

With things having taken this shocking turn, what ought he to do?

If Julis were present, she'd be able to burn them to ash. At the very least, it didn't look like pure swordsmanship would be enough to dispatch these foes.

(Maybe Ser-Vesta would work...)

However, using Ser-Vesta required a full release of his seal, which would place a restriction on his movements. That wasn't an option in this situation.

"Looks like neither slashes nor stabs will work."

Kirin, who at some intermediary point had backed up against Ayato, said tensely.

She held her unsheathed sword in her hands.

"They're more than likely slime-based entities; don't you think that appearance is just mimicry?"

"That does make sense..."

"It looks like running is the best option here."

If they were to flee, it's unlikely they'd be caught, but in these foggy conditions, if they were caught, it'd be catastrophic.

"-Shall I give this a try?"

"Eh?"

Having spoken, Kirin advanced on one of the dragons with a measured gait.

On guard, the dragon loosed a threatening roar. After reaching a certain distance from the dragon, she suddenly leapt into the air.

"...Sorry."

As she calmly spoke, her body had already initiated the attack.

In the following moment, the dragon's body split into halves.

"Uoooooooooooooooooh!"

As before, it howled as it again melted.

Kirin faced down the slime body and continued to attack. One blow followed another, slashing it to pieces. The speed of her consecutive attacks could only be described as divine.

Now in ten pieces, the parts of the slime that had hit the floor extended a tentacle as the parts mid-air began to shrink.

As this was occurring, Ayato noticed something strange. One of the segments of the rapidly shrinking slime was a spherical body, wriggling around.

It seemed as if it was trying to escape, but almost as if unsure of where to go, it moved both left and right, before it soon had nowhere left to go.

By the time all that was left was about the size of a person's fist, the sphere stopped moving.

"-Finished."

-Flash-

Kirin's blade flashed as it chopped the sphere in two.

At the same moment, the rest of the slime stopped moving.

It seemed that the spherical segment was the control core.

Watching these events occur, the other dragons pulled back in seeming fear.

"So that's the center, eh. Now that we know that, these shouldn't be a problem..."

Kirin re-sheathed her sword, downplaying her feelings, although Ayato sensed sorrow hidden there.

"I have to say, it's amazing that you noticed that."

"The flow of Prana through their body was strange. It's something I've always been very sensitive to."

For the Starpulse Generation to be able to grasp the flow of Prana was second-nature, but this was an entirely different matter. This wasn't a matter of training or anything - to be able to accurately grasp the flow of such minute traces of Prana wasn't anything other than God-given talent.

"...I think I start to understand just why you're so strong, Toudou-san."

Ayato gave a wry smile and picked up the severed halves of the spherical object.

Its composition was unclear, but that it was both inorganic and artificial were immediately obvious.

"As expected...it's Allekant."

"Allekant?"

Kirin asked with a perplexed look on her face.

"An explanation might take a while- Uwa!"

Having pulled back, the dragons loosed their fireball attacks.

Of the four remaining dragons, all had attacked Ayato.

Recognizing that Kirin wasn't to be trifled with, they focused their attacks on Ayato.

-Their decision was correct.

"W-wait a momeeeeeeeeeent!"

Now wasn't the time for a casual chat.

(No way around it, I'll have to remove the seal.)

Having decided, he jumped backward to open the distance, and landed near the entrance to the park.

As he gathered his Prana, fireballs flew once more.

But this time, he wasn't their intended target.

The orbit they traced was far too low. Exploding with a terrific boom, they crashed into the ground around his feet.

The cement around him began to crack.

"Eh...?"

By the time he'd realized what was happening, it was already too late.

In the next moment, a five meter circle, with Ayato at its center, caved in. There was no way Asterisk's ground would give way to such force; the ground had likely been excavated beforehand in setting the trap.

"Amagiri-senpai!"

Kirin rushed forward and thrust her hand out.

Ayato reached out and grabbed her hand, the only thing keeping him from falling.

Kirin caught hold of the edge of the hole, her left hand extended downward.

"A-are you alright, Amagiri-senpai?"

"Yeah, I owe you one."

His sigh of relief lasted but an instant.

With an ominous ~crack~, the edge of the hole Kirin was grabbing onto for dear life gave way.

"-Wah!"

With a scream, the bodies of the pair were swallowed by the darkness.

"With this, the first act is over?" Nibbling her lips with a bored expression, Ernesta proffered.

The image on the screen before her revealed the scene of Ayato and Kirin disappearing down the hole.

"Is that giant hole really alright? If the Stjarnagarmr find it, things won't turn out well."

"That area was already scheduled to undergo construction. For the time being, it should be okay."

Camilla, seated next to her, focused on confirming the information before her.

"So that was the phryganella viscous attack body. Tenorio still had a set."

"They truly can't be underestimated. I have to admit I'm pretty interested myself."

"Yeah, mana flow control as well as mimicry techniques - it's pretty interesting. The rest of it is absolutely worthless though. Useless from the very beginning. For starters, if it can turn into anything, why a lizard? Why not a penguin or a kitty?"

Ernesta picked up some sort of fabric doll from the floor, and rubbed it on her chin.

"Those are clearly just your personal preferences...More importantly, when Prana is used to force a change, it takes on the pre-stored appearance. Moreover, it seems that the cores are limited to storing only one form."

Camilla referenced the window before her, full of information which had been fed her by her spy in the Tenorio faction. The alteration and modification of living things was Tenorio's specialty. Ernesta's absurd comment aside, Camilla felt there was much to praise there.

As she pondered what sort of breeding could result in such a thing, she gasped in surprise.

"So there's only one kind? There's nothing surprising about that. Or rather, for the Tenorio who have distanced themselves from the Great Doctor, that's the most they can do, huh."

Ernesta's interest gradually faded.

"Anyway, they sure are weak. Is there even a practical use for something like that?"

"It can't be helped. Their goal is living weapons, after all. These are just a byproduct of that research."

"That much is true. But still, at this stage, aren't my puppets like a billion times stronger?"

Now that was an exaggeration if she'd ever heard one. Measuring things in such a way was terribly childish.

Camilla, however, kept her thoughts to herself.

"To be honest, this is simply a matter of choosing one's opponent poorly. That Seidokan rank one's title isn't just for show, after all."

"Yeah, that's certainly true. What they aim for can't be found here at Allekant."

"Moreover, even despite our excellent performance at last year's Phoenix, the students responsible have pretty much all graduated."

"On the other hand, that's given us the chance to make our debut."

At that moment, the image on the screen changed.

"Here we go. Act 2 begins."

"From their point of view, this next part is the real thing, right?"

"Hehe, and that's precisely why it's worth looking forward to."

Ayato's first feeling was that of shock. Immediately following was an icy chill and then a difficulty breathing.

(-Water?!)

His surroundings were immersed in darkness, and all he could see were bubbles. It seems they'd fallen into a deep body of water.

Having lost all sense of what was up and what was down, he forced himself to calm down and relaxed his body.

Normally, such an action would cause one to float to the surface, but on the contrary, he began to sink.

(Crap, it's the weights!)

Immediately throwing off the weights weighing him down, he swam in the direction of the source of the faint but definite light.

"Puhaaaa!"

Emerging from the watery depths with a splash, he inhaled deeply. Only then was he able to truly calm down.

They were in a terrifyingly vast space. From far above his present location, he could see the hole which they'd fallen in through. Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, there were no stairs. Asterisk's underground had many forms and uses, and thus was this trap made possible.

It had clearly been intentional.

"But man, this really is huge."

From the surface of the water to the very top where they'd fallen in looked to be a distance of about twenty meters. Its width was impossible to estimate. Looking across, enormous pillars and the water's surface filled his vision for as far as he could see.

There was nearly no illumination whatsoever, and he could just barely make out the distinction between the walls and the ceiling.

"Oh, crap! Toudou-san!?"

Looking around frantically, he noticed a faint splash not far off.

"Toudou-san!"

Seeing her struggle desperately, she looked to be drowning; perhaps it was the weights that were pulling her down.

Ayato promptly swam to her side as Kirin approached him with a face nearly in tears.

"*cough* *cough* T-thank you, Amagiri-senpai...! Thanks for saving me..."

"Are you alright? Hurry up and get rid of those weights..."

As he moved to help her, he noticed. They were already gone.

"Huh...?"

"Uu...S-sorry...Truth is, I-I can't really swim..."

"Oh...Now I see."

For someone as stunningly athletic as herself to be unable to swim was beyond surprising.

Even for members of the Starpulse Generation, it seems there were things they were proficient in...and things they weren't quite so proficient in.

"No, I ought to apologize. It's my fault you got dragged into this mess."

She'd only fallen in because she'd tried to save him.

"Don't say that. In any case, where are we...?" holding her breath, Kirin asked nasally.

"My best guess is we're underneath Asterisk."

"The ballast area then," Kirin mumbled as she looked around.

"Ballast area?"

"Because Asterisk is an artificial-island, in order to keep level, it has to utilize the lake water."

"Oh, right."

It took an intimate familiarity with the construction of the city to have such an insight.

"In that case, there ought to be an exit that workers use-"

Kirin turned around and suddenly reddened.

"What's wrong?"

"N-nothing! It's just...um..."

Her stuttering clued Ayato in on what had happened.

She'd necessarily pulled in close to him. Given their extreme proximity, her blushing was, of course, expected. They were, after all, essentially stuck to one another.

Only the two heads were above the water. Below the water's surface, Ayato's hand was holding her up, or perhaps more precisely, engulfed in her cleavage.

"S-sorry, sorry! I-I think it's best I swim by myself after all...!"

"Not at all! It's my..."

Even for a member of the Starpulse Generation, to buoy up two people's weights wasn't something that could be done indefinitely. They needed to find the exit, or at the very least, somewhere they could rest upon, or they'd be in deep trouble.

-At that moment.

Ayato caught a glimpse of an enormous shadow in the water beneath them.

"Toudou-san..."

"Y-yes...?"

"Hold your breath..."

Saying that, Ayato grabbed her and suddenly plunged below.

He exerted all his strength in this endeavor; they had to get away.

However, that enormous shadow wasn't something on a scale they were capable of dealing with, and they were swept away in a current.

Just as they felt there was no escape, they suddenly erupted out of the water.

The scene before them was hard to imagine.

"Huh..."

"Oh my...isn't that-"

Neither of the two knew what to say.

In the place where the two were now floating, the head of an enormous dragon was outstretched.

In comparison with the dragons that had just attacked them previously, the former was larger by far. Simply the part that extended out above the water

was already a good ten meters long. In total, it looked to be closer to fifty. From its silhouette alone, it looked like almost like a plesiosaur.

The dragons earlier had seemed quite reptilian, but this new animal looked to be more like a snake. Nonetheless, after seeing its body and legs, as well as its enormous head and razor-sharp fangs, "dragon" was the only word appropriate to describe this animal.

This dragon, however, was identical to the others in one aspect - its open hostility toward them.

"...Guess that's how it is. Given how we'd fallen down here, guess there's no way we could have made it back up so easily."

The reason they'd been thrown down here was so that they'd encounter this dragon.

"Amagiri-senpai...this dragon feels a lot like the smaller ones from before," analyzing the flow of its Prana, Kirin quickly determined.

"In other words, its true appearance is a slime?"

"More or less..."

"That's not exactly good news."

If that was the case, then standard forms of cutting and slicing would be to no avail.

Rather than attempting to deal with it barehanded, the wisest course of action would be to immediately activate his Lux while concurrently releasing his seal. This situation didn't allow for anything but.

Fetters appeared from magic circles all around him as his Prana was forcibly raised. In the darkness, this was the only source of light.

Deciding its opponent had taken a hostile action, the dragon roared and charged.

"Kh!"

Even if he was at full-power, that didn't imply that he was capable of high speed movement in the water.

Guarding Kirin with his own body, he bore the brunt of the blow head-on.

Slammed with great force, they were carried away by the water.

Holding his breath as he dodged the dragon's fangs, he was thrown into one of the pillars.

A crater in the thick pillar formed from the impact.

"Owwwwww..."

"A-are you okay?!"

"Ah yeah. I'm fine, although this situation looks pretty bad."

Having reinforced his body with Prana, he hadn't taken any major injuries.

That said, things couldn't be allowed to simply continue like this.

The dragon confirmed its prey's condition from not far off. Unexpectedly, it looked to have quite the careful personality.

"T-this is all because I'm a burden on you! Let me go!" Kirin suddenly said.

"I-it's all my fault Amagiri-senpai got hurt...my...!"

From within his embrace, she began to sob.

"T-Toudou-san?!"

"I-I really am no good...No matter how hard I practice, in the end...No more, I refuse to have anyone sacrifice themselves for me again..."

Kirin shook her head childishly as she spoke.

"..."

Ayato sighed, and holding her tightly, began to pat her head.

"It's alright. Don't worry."

"B-but...!"

"Usually no one can stand a chance against you, right? Since I was able to do so, why not trust in me a little more?"

"That's-"

Ayato stared into her eyes and gently responded.

"There's something else I want to say; no, that I can't not say. Toudou-san, you're very kind, but very strong. You are an amazing girl."

"Eh...?"

Completely stunned, she stared at him blankly.

"...G-got it."

Her face dyed a deep scarlet, she nodded emphatically.

Wiping her tears away, she raised her head with a determined look.

"Good."

Ayato again patted her head and activated Ser-Vesta.

As he poured Prana within, black words appeared, granting a tinge of black to the white blade.

"-Now if I can just find somewhere to get a proper footing..."

As he spoke, he lightly swung Ser-Vesta, careful not to let it touch the water.

A large space was gouged out of the thick pillar as easily as if it were tofu, creating enough room for two to stand.

In the back of his mind, Ayato realized that he'd just destroyed a vital foundational structure, but in this situation, he couldn't afford to be choosy.

As he gave Kirin a chance to rise, the dragon seized the opportunity to attack.

-Without so much as turning, Ayato simply waved his sword.

As the pointed fangs came within inches of piercing, its head, severed cleanly from its neck, flew off the into the distance.

The head melted in midair, and returning to its body, regained its original form.

"...No surprise that it's the same as the ones above, I guess."

Watching this scene play out before him as Kirin climbed up, Ayato frowned.

On guard after the previous attack, the dragon retreated some ten meters distance and slowly began to circle the pillar they were situated upon. Not an easy opponent indeed.

Again in similar fashion to the dragons from before, the dragon gaped its mouth wide and began to focus mana.

However, as Ayato again casually swung Ser-Vesta, it all vanished like so much smoke.

When compared to Julis' attacks, this was but child's play.

"That said, I'm not exactly making any progress either..."

This wasn't an opponent he could just blindly rush in and attack; anything but a sure-kill was meaningless. This wasn't just any foe; if he failed to destroy its core with his attack - as Kirin had with the slime - then there wasn't any point.

"Toudou-san, you can follow the flow of its Prana, correct?"

"Ah, yes. It's faint, but it's there."

"Where's the core?"

"Well...it's constantly shifting its location."

What a troublesome enemy.

"...That doesn't give me any other choice then. Let's give this a shot, shall we?"

"Give this a shot...?"

In reaction to Kirin's surprised look, Ayato raised Ser-Vesta for her to see.

"Hmm, well, this really is a difficult enemy to deal with...so it's not like we have any other choice but to press forward."

Saying this, Ayato began to focus his Prana into Ser-Vesta.

-Meteor Arts.

Concentrating all his Prana using the mana dote as a focal point, this technique temporarily increased the output of his weapon. When it came to enhancing physical reinforcement, such as what he'd used to defend himself earlier, Prana was quite easy to use. When expended in attacking,

however, its use was much more restricted. Generally, this was solved via the use of a weapon as a medium for dispersal, but its effects were limited. The sole exceptions were the barehanded style employed by students of World Dragon Seventh Institute and mana dites.

Nonetheless, Ayato had never before succeeded at using Meteor Arts. Because the sheer amount of Prana he carried within him was too vast by far, the burden placed upon normal Lux weapons had always resulted in their destruction. Although it was, of course, possible for him to instead control the amount of Prana he injected, such fine control over his Prana was beyond his ability.

And thus, until now, he'd long since given up hope on seeing it to fruition-

"You should be able to keep up, right?"

As if responding to Ayato's words, Ser-Vesta emitted a low sound.

As if devouring Ayato's boundless quantities of Prana, Ser-Vesta began to change shape. The area containing the black words hovering over its blade began to widen, and the entire blade itself began to lengthen tremendously.

"Amazing..."

Kirin swallowed. The rate at which Ser-Vesta grew began to accelerate, and within moments, it had grown to ten meters in length. Its entire body emitted a low hum, and the black script fairly danced around the body of the blade.

Feeling a deep and instinctual fear, the dragon turned to make its escape - but it was already too late.

"HAAA!"

Ayato swung his sword downward. The moment the blade contacted its body, the dragon's body began to hiss. Ser-Vesta continued downward, pushing down into the water.

In an instant, the water began to evaporate before their eyes, as if blown away by a hurricane gale.

Steam rose unceasingly, violently soaking Ayato and Kirin's hair. The mist settled back down around the two's feet, and calm was once more restored; the dragon had been vaporized entirely.

"...Well, something like that, I guess?"

This was the first time in his life Ayato has expended such a vast quantity of Prana.

This feeling of hard-earned exhaustion felt rather comfortable.

Unfortunately-

"Ugh...!"

The price for the removal of his seal came hungrily and painfully.

"A-Amagiri-senpai! A-are you alright, Amagiri-senpai?!"

Once more, magic circles appeared all around him, binding his strength once again.

Kirin caught his body as he collapsed. That softness was beyond description, and he blushed, but in his present state, he could do naught else.

"-So the time limit for your full strength is five minutes?"

"It's as you say. Well, I could push things a bit, but ten minutes is the absolute limit."

Ayato, leaning against the hole he'd carved in the pillar, gave a bitter laugh as answer.

That left the two without any choice but to wait here to be saved.

After all, he couldn't so much as lift a finger and Kirin couldn't swim, so that was the reality of things.

He was unable to reach anyone with his phone which was disturbing, but nonetheless, given the length of time he'd been out of contact, someone had likely noticed something was awry. Since he'd never returned after his routine morning training, Eishirou had definitely noticed the anomaly...probably.

"However, when I expend all my Prana, the effects occur sooner than normal. That said, today is my first time experiencing anything like this."

"I-is that so?"

Kirin seemed a bit crestfallen.

"...Is something the matter?" Ayato inquired.

Kirin looked near to tears.

"Amagiri-senpai...just how are you able to fight to this extent?"

"Hmm?"

Even though the question had come as a surprise, Ayato found the answer came rather smoothly to his lips.

"-Because there's someone I want to be of service to."

Absolutely.

This was Ayato's desire of late.

The wish he sought to fulfill.

"..."

"...Riessfeld-senpai?"

"Yes, that's right."

Hearing Ayato affirm her guess, Kirin lowered her gaze, seemingly regretful.

"T-then, it's as I thought, isn't it? A-Amagiri-senpai, y-you, y-you're in love with Riessfeld-senpai, right?!"

"Huh?!"

Ayato felt entirely confounded by this startling question.

"I-it's nothing like that...! O-of course she's someone I get along well with, but-"

"Eh? B-but then..."

Watching his stunned expression, Kirin seemed to want to say more, but she held her silence.

"...Forget it. I'm sorry for asking something so weird."

Bowing her head and mumbling softly, an expression of heartfelt joy floated onto her face.

"If that's true, then I..."

Her mutterings didn't reach Ayato's ears.

"Hmm? Well, I guess that's that...*achoo!*"

Just as Ayato recovered his breath, he gave a mighty sneeze.

"A-are you okay?"

"Ah, it's just that hiding here in this wet hole-in-the-ground sure is cold."

"Yeah, and our clothes are thoroughly soaked, too...*achoo!*"

Kirin seemed to be as cold as he was.

Down here, or perhaps it was better to say here where it was wet, even if it was summer, their current locale was quite cool. If things went on like this, they'd surely both catch a cold.

"At the very least, we need to get out of these wet clothes..."

"...R-right..."

As they traded glances, silence fell between them.

There was no way he could suggest stripping. If he really said that out loud, he'd be forever marked a pervert. Even when it came to removing his own clothes, there was a feeling of daunting pressure, like he'd never be able to turn back from the path he'd started on when intruding upon the girls' dorms...

"T-then..."

As Ayato sunk deep into thought, Kirin turned redder than she ever had before, and began to tug at his clothes.

"...U-um, w-wearing these soaked clothes isn't healthy..."

"...Eh?"

"..."

Kirin's face looked about ready to give off steam it was so red, and she bowed her head.

Looking back and forth for a brief moment, she-

"...C-can you turn around...?" asked in a voice so quiet it was almost inaudible.

They hung their clothes using Kirin's sword as a clothesline.

The edge of the pillar's hole happened to conveniently serve as a place on which to dry their clothing.

Measuring just over two feet and three inches^[9], could it have done so, her Inoue Shinkai-crafted blade would have wept to have been used for such a purpose, but it would have to put up with it for a while longer. (Incidentally, her sword was named "Senbakiri".)^[10]

The ballast area in which they found themselves wasn't just cool, but also very damp, and so they had no other choice if they wanted their clothes to dry. It was possible that Ser-Vesta's heat would be able to accomplish the job in a mere moment, but the fact of the matter was that having already released his seal, Ayato was in no position to use Ser-Vesta again.

"..."

Ayato and Kirin were both immersed in silence, their backs to one another.

They weren't, of course, fully naked. Both still had their undergarments on.

Even if their backs were to one another, he could feel the intense beating of a heart, though whether that was his own or Kirin's, he wasn't sure.

"Um, Toudou-san...?"

"Y-yes!"

Speaking in order to loosen the tense atmosphere, Kirin answered stiffly, overly conscious.

This both relieved Ayato, and made him happy.

"This time, do you mind if I'm the one to ask? Toudou-san, what is the reason you fight?"

"M-me?"

His question caught her unawares, and she sat perplexed for a moment before finally opening her mouth to speak.



"The...the reason I fight is something I believe I've mentioned before - it's for my father's sake."

"I presume your father is also of the Starpulse Generation?"

"...That's right."

Children of members of the Starpulse Generation weren't necessarily members themselves, but the probability was quite high. If both parents were of the Starpulse Generation, than the probability their child would be as well was ten times greater than otherwise.

"My father's been detained as a criminal. I want to help him."

"Criminal...?"

As long as victory was obtained in the Festa, the Integrated Enterprise Foundation would see any wish to fruition, even if that meant distorting the very laws that were the fabric of society. Even criminals would be granted an immediate pardon if so desired; this had already occurred on many instances previous.

"He didn't do anything wrong! He was just trying to help me!"

The longer she spoke, the more emotional she became. For a moment, she seemed about to turn around before remembering and stopping herself.

"When you say he wanted to help you, what do you mean? What did he do?"

"...Five years ago, my father and I were at a store when a robber came in. He took me hostage, and Father...he, in order to save me and left without any other choice, killed that man."

He heard her teeth grind in anger as she recounted her tale, evidence of the sheer depth of her bitterness.

Five years ago, she'd been but eight years old. Just a child.

"...Let me guess. The perpetrator wasn't a member of the Starpulse Generation."

Kirin nodded.

Truth be told, the current state of the Starpulse Generation was terribly fragile, regardless of the country or state in question. One might go so far as to say their human rights had been impinged upon. When a member of the Starpulse Generation harmed another, it would never be ruled self-defense, but always a use of excessive force instead. Even if the other party did not die as a result of their actions, the majority of rulings resulted in their punishment being harsher by far than that of the criminal in question.

This was one of the few elements of public opinion even the Integrated Enterprise Foundation had been powerless to overturn.

It went without saying that this was a terrible situation.

"The robber didn't realize I was a member of the Starpulse Generation or he would never have taken me for a hostage. The moment I saw that knife blade though...I was so scared I couldn't move."

Even as children, those of the Starpulse Generation wielded considerable power. However, if they had yet to undergo any training, they were nothing more than a young child in front of an adult wielding a weapon. That overwhelming feeling of menace was something unavoidable.

"It was then that he saved you?"

"Yes...At the time I was still in training, but truthfully, that wasn't an opponent that should have posed any threat to me. But I was too scared...I didn't have the courage-"

He heard her snifle.

"...If things continue, even after decades to come, Father won't be able to come home. Only Uncle is able to speak to him. It was Uncle who offered me this one and only path toward my father's freedom."

"And so you came here?"

"...That's right. Their relationship as siblings is terrible, since Uncle loathes the Starpulse Generation with every fiber of his being. The reason is likely due to the deep-seated resentment he holds for being passed up as the successor to our style in spite of being the eldest son. That's why even if he's only helping me for his own sake, it's fine. This is already the only chance I have left."

Kirin spoke, half-weeping.

What should he say? Something came to Ayato's memory.

Just what was this strange feeling of unease that disturbed him still?

"Truth be told, Uncle really is a most amazing person. Using his authority as a member of the Integrated Enterprise Corporation, he was able to suppress the news about Father, which instead reported a different name and title."

"He went that far..."

Ayato was shocked. This truly demonstrated the awe-inspiring might of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation which surpassed that of national governments by far.

In any case, this seemed to match up. He hadn't heard any news of an arrest in the Toudou-style main family, which given the scope of their influence, would have been scandalous indeed.

"My coming here was the same. My entry this spring, my match opponents, intelligence gathering, even battle plans such as when I fight, or what is the most effective way to obtain results - Uncle is responsible for all of these."

Her back began to quiver.

"If it weren't for Uncle, there's nothing I-"

"-That's not at all true, Toudou-san."

Her half-mumbled confession was flatly rejected by Ayato.

"Not true...?"

"Even if you're walking toward your goal, but the path you're taking isn't your own. That cannot happen. If things continue like this, then very soon, you will find yourself on the wrong path."

Indeed, a path that wasn't chosen of one's own accord was unacceptable.

Walking a path that you did not desire would only wear away at you, little by little, until there was nothing left.

That wasn't something Ayato wanted to see happen to her.

"Not that I really have the right to comment, though. I've only recently discovered it myself."

"..."

Kirin once more immersed herself in silence before finally squeezing words out.

"But...I have no choice...I can't do this alone...I can't, I can't..."

"Then there's nothing to worry about."

"?"

"Toudou-san, you are not alone. At the very least, I'm here. This way, you can feel free to choose the path that you want to walk."

"...The path I want..."

Kirin mumbled those words over and over, as if affirming something to herself before stealing a glance at Ayato.

Deep within her eyes he glimpsed a hidden radiance, but as it appeared for just the briefest of instants, he wasn't sure if it was just his imagination.

"But that's the not the case during a fight, okay? Throwing a fight would be too ill-mannered - not that there's any room to throw a fight when you're my opponent."

Ayato smiled wryly, and accepted her gaze.

"Hehe, you sure are strange, Amagiri-senpai."

"...Julis said the same thing."

Her shoulders shook as she wiped the tears from her eyes. Ayato could only scratch his head awkwardly.

"-But also very cool," Kirin whispered, too soft for Ayato to hear.

"Hmm, eh? Uwa! Toudou-san!"

"Huh? Ah...kya!"

The two finally noticed they'd turned to face one another.

As the sight of Kirin's glistening skin sunk deep into Ayato's pupils, he frantically turned.

"S-sorry!"

"N-not at all. T-this was my-"

The two apologized in a fluster when suddenly a voice came from above.

Help had finally arrived. Ayato heaved a sigh of relief.

Suddenly Kirin spoke from behind him in a shy tone.

"U-um, Amagiri-senpai, earlier you patted my head?"

"Huh? Oh, that's right, sorry about that. Did you mind?"

A girl of her age, of course she minded.

However, Kirin shook her head.

"No...it's just that Father used to do the same thing," she answered, happy.

Chapter 7 - Resolve and Resolution

On this morning, Kouichirou was not a happy camper.

Kirin's whereabouts were unknown. As her emergency contact, he promptly made his way to Seidokan with the utmost haste.

There, learning that Kirin was safe and sound, he relaxed. However, as he thought of how much time had been wasted over this incident, his relief gave way to anger.

The 7th Instructional Assessment Office's - Galaxy's - headquarters were located in Otsu, the capital city of Japan's Shiga prefecture. Kouichirou, however, had set up a branch office in Asterisk as a forward operating base of sorts. It went without saying that the activity made more convenient by doing so was his management of Kirin.

"Honestly, stop giving me cause for concern."

Kouichirou was the same as always, and having called Kirin to the shadow of the school building, was berating her once again.

"...I'm sorry, Uncle."

Kirin bowed her head obediently.

"Forget it. More importantly, your next opponent-"

"Before that Uncle, might I ask a question?"

"...What?"

"Just now, were you 'concerned' for Toudou Kirin, the person, or were you 'concerned' about Toudou Kirin, the tool?"

The question took him by surprise, and the blood drained from his face. Quickly recovering, his lips twisted in a cruel grin and he looked down at her with contempt.

"That's not something you need to know. There's no reason to ask such a stupid question as that. After all, you already know. What I need is only your strength."

"Is that so..."

Kirin head dipped lonesomely.

Kouichirou could not afford to lose Kirin. That, however, extended only as far as the extent to which her skills made her an irreplaceable tool. There was nothing more to it than that. His feelings for her were anything but love; they might have been relatives, but they were estranged relatives.

Kirin's father, Seijirou, had cast aside his own elder brother to lay claim to the inheritance of their Toudou-style. For this sin, Kouichirou had never forgiven him. What had originally been his had been robbed from him by a mere happenstance of birth; this was something he would never forgive.

From when he was very young, he'd thrown himself into the Toudou-style. He'd spared no expense in practicing the arts of the sword, and had at last attained a level of swordsmanship worthy of succeeding the Toudou-style main family's legacy. Unfortunately, the vast number of the Toudou-style's students were members of the Starpulse Generation, and only one who exhibited an identical strength was truly capable of guiding them. This was something he well understood.

And yet, the existence known as the Starpulse Generation was something he refused to accept.

They were not, after all, human.

They were monsters.

If it were not for them, why else would that which had been rightfully his been stolen away by another?

And so he'd cut off all relations with his family, and instead begun work here in Asterisk.

Watching the demons destroy one another as they reveled in greed and avarice was thoroughly satisfying. The ironic thing was, Kouichirou possessed a singular talent at gauging and assessing the abilities of the Starpulse Generation.

Milking his talent for all it was worth, he had smoothly climbed the ranks.

At that time, he'd run into Kirin, who could only be described as the greatest tool imaginable. On this one thing and this one thing only, Kouichirou was grateful to his brother.

The Integrated Entertainment Enterprise's Galaxy was a group that only cared about those who produced the very greatest results. By exploiting

Kirin for all she was worth, attaining the position of the cadre of the very most elite wasn't something unimaginable.

For that reason, he'd quickly devised a plan, which until now, had proceeded most smoothly. For the time being, in order to spread her reputation, he'd ensured that the students she fought were all well-known. Eventually, however, the numbers would shrink, and her fame would only grow as a result.

His true aim was the Lindvolus, two years from now. With Kirin's abilities, the possibility of loss did not exist. When, two years hence, she laid claim to victory at the Lindvolus, standing undefeated, both their reputations would soar to untold heights.

Although that would require a strategy capable of overthrowing the Venomous Witch, they still had two years time in which to come up with a plan. That would be enough. Kirin just needed to obtain an Ogre Lux. For the moment, however, the burden of her reputation as the "rank one who neither wields an Ogre Lux nor is an ability user" was assuredly heavy indeed.

As Kouichirou contemplated in silence, his expression darkened.

"That reminds me, when you were ambushed...wasn't that Amagiri Ayato guy with you? The one who uses Ser-Vesta?"

As he thought of that brat, his mood soured, and he clicked his tongue.

"I don't know the full details, but it seems that not long ago he was involved in an incident with Allekant. It goes without saying that this and that are connected somehow. From now on, stay away from him. Getting dragged into things that aren't any of our concern will only result in unnecessary complications."

Given the scope of his authority, Kouichirou wasn't made aware of the details of what had occurred, but he nonetheless knew of the pact that Allekant and Seidokan had formed. That punk likely had something to do with it.

"-On that point, I will decline."

Kirin flatly rejected his command.

"...What?"

Kouichirou was sure he'd imagined it.

Until now, Kirin had given almost no hint of resistance whatsoever. But now, she stared him directly in the eyes with a determined look in her own.

"Fine. Let's hear the reason."

Holding back his wrath, he glared at her.

"Amagiri-senpai has already taught me something invaluable. What's more, there are many other things I would learn from him."

"Learn?"

Kouichirou snorted with impatience.

"How asinine. All you need to do is heed my command. Don't even try thinking about anything else."

"...No, I-"

Kouichirou didn't bother to let her finish, cutting her off mid-sentence with a stinging slap across her cheek.

There was no need to hold back. Kirin hadn't so much as budged an inch, and she returned his stare, unflinching.

As he looked into those eyes, which burned with a fierce will and fiercer determination, it was he who was intimidated.

Quickly regaining his original demeanor, he snorted once more.

"Hmph...! Interesting, you dare to defy me? Tell me then, what's your plan? Without me guiding your every step, just how do you plan to win?"

"Yes, it's as you say."

"HAHA, HAHAHAHA! And here I was, wondering what you were going to say. Something like this, of course it's beyond your ability. Listen closely, it's only because of my efforts that you're ranked first. I certainly acknowledge that you are strong, but don't you dare underestimate this city. I don't care what it is you do; you will never see your dream come true. The only thing you will do is waste your time."

As Kouichirou continued to speak, he recovered his inward calm.

Indeed. This foolish coward he called niece would never be able to accomplish a thing without him at her side.

Even if she'd finally decided to grow a backbone, she was still nothing more than a petulant child.

All it would take is a slight intimidation of threat, and she'd fold like a house of cards.

"Isn't your goal to save your father, to save Seijirou, in the shortest time possible? Then just obediently heed my command. If you do as I say, then in just three years, no, two and a half years, you will obtain the victory you desire in the Festa. Is that something you can achieve alone?"

"...Not at all. I think such a thing is impossible."

Kirin lowered her head.

Satisfied, Kouichirou nodded.

"Exactly. You know it just as well as I do. Now then-"

"That said, I don't think Uncle's way's going to work either."

As Kirin raised her head to meet his gaze, he glared straight on back.

"What was that?"

"There's something I should say. The one who can't afford to underestimate this city isn't just me, Uncle. Someone who isn't capable of stepping forward is also someone who is incapable of obtaining victory; that's the kind of place Asterisk is. You're right - I certainly do know."

"Girl, don't speak of things of which you know not...!"

Kouichirou's voice trembled in rage.

"I have been watching the students here long before you were even born! You have only been here but a few short months..."

"-Which is long enough to understand that much."

Those words made something in Kouichirou snap.

Without thinking, he raised his fist and brought it down.

-However.

"Sorry, Uncle."

Kirin had blocked his punch.

"I'm very grateful for all you've done for me. Know that those are my sincere feelings. Nevertheless, I've already decided to do things my own way from now on. If I don't...then there will inevitably come a day when I know regret."

As she finished speaking, she released Kouichirou's arm and promptly left.

Kouichirou stared dumbly at her back as she walked off. Recovering his wits, he shouted.

"W-WAIT! What do you think you're going to do now?!"

"That's a good question...For now, I think I'm going to duel someone."

Kirin stopped, and turning back, smiled calmly.

"A duel?"

"That's right. I've already chosen my own opponent, except this time, I'm doing it for me."

The following week, Seidokan's multi-purpose stadium.

This large arena was packed with spectators.

Just like in the training room utilized by Julis and Ayato, the stadium was carefully covered with protective screens.

These protective shields, capable of warding off Lux-based attacks, had enormous energy requirements and similarly large generators. On the entirety of Seidokan grounds, only this and three other locations had similar facilities.

In this arena, normally reserved for the official ranking tournament, two individuals occupied the center.

"For accepting my request, I sincerely thank you - Amagiri-senpai."

One of the two, Kirin, bowed her head politely.

Her expression was bright and free.

"Not at all...Although, I have to ask - why did you want to start a duel yourself? And what's more, with me?"

The other was Ayato, wearing an awkward smile.

"In order to truly move forward, I felt this was something that had to be done."

"Move forward...?"

"...Yes."

At her reply, he sighed and shrugged helplessly.

"I understand. Let me make something clear first, though; if we fight, I won't be holding back...or rather, I can't afford to hold back."

"...That was my hope."

The faintest of smiles graced her face as she drew Senbakiri from its scabbard.

Ayato pulled back and activated his Lux.

The scene before her startled her, and Kirin asked, "You're not going to use your Ogre Lux?"

"If I use Ser-Vesta, there's no way I can match your speed."

The sword-type Lux Ayato was wielding was, at most, half the size of Ser-Vesta.

"Anyway, if I lose by just stupidly repeating what I did last time, there's no way Julis is going to let me go. Tactics are necessary here."

"Tactics, you say...I look forward to it."

Kirin waved Senbakiri.

The light, reflecting off her blade, shined brightly.

"Alright then, let's get started. To be honest, I'd prefer not to fight somewhere like this, but we can't just keep people waiting, now can we?"

"Haha, that's true."

Julis, on the other hand, occupying a special spot, had been seated shoulder to shoulder with a certain someone.

"There was no need to go to all this effort..."

Julis' face revealed her displeasure as she glared at Claudia.

"Such a highly anticipated event as this? How could we possibly do any less? After all, this is Toudou-san, our school's top rank, and Ayato, who's on the same level as she is. A rematch like this one, there's no way anyone'd want to miss out."

"Well...that much is true."

Julis looked at Ayato with concern.

Ayato would not have accepted unless he had a chance of victory, but there were simply so many things that gave her cause for concern.

There was the possibility that the limit on his unsealed powers would be revealed; whether or not he won, that would prove an obstacle forevermore...

"...Are you truly so worried, Riessfeld?"

The person who opened her mouth to speak to the worrying Julis was none other than Saya, seated behind her.

"That's a matter of course, Sasamiya. His opponent's the rank one, you know? There's no way I wouldn't worry."

"It'll be fine, don't worry."

She didn't know how Saya could trust Ayato so deeply, and speak in a voice so filled with certainty.

Julis wanted nothing more than to share Saya's trust in her partner, Ayato, but the time they'd known each other was still relatively short. The thought made her slightly unhappy, and she sulked.

"If last time was any indication, Toudou Kirin's swordsmanship is nothing to scoff at. Did you see it?"

"Yes, I did."

It hadn't taken long for videos of Ayato and Kirin's duel to spread across the Web.

There was no way anyone who cared in the least about the standings would have ignored the incident.

"Toudou is certainly strong. When it comes to swordsmanship, there's no doubt that she's superior to Ayato," Saya answered expressionlessly.

"That's why-"

"But it doesn't matter. Ayato's well accustomed to fighting those who are stronger than he is."

"...And who would that be?"

Julis spun to face Saya.

"Haru-nee - Ayato's older sister."

Saya's answer was short and to the point.

"Hmm...That guy's sister, is she really that strong?"

Saya nodded in response to Julis' murmured words.

"Well, I'm sure that punk's got something up his sleeve. Let's just see how things play out."

Suddenly interrupting was the person seated next to Claudia, Lester.

"What's that supposed to mean? Do you know what's going on, Lester?"

"A little. He asked for my help with a Lux. I lent him one."

"A Lux...? If that's all he needed, why didn't he just request one from the equipment division?"

"It'd take some time before his request could be fulfilled. The fastest way is still to simply borrow another's."

"He~h, McPhail sure is reliable."

Just as Julis was about to reply, another voice cut in, this time from Eishirou, seated in the row before her.

Just as he'd done last time, he'd monopolized the prime spot for recording.

"Don't tell me he asked something of you, too, Yabuki?"

"You could say that...Oh, it's starting."

At Eishirou's comment, all eyes turned forward.

Ayato, occupying center-stage, explosively released his Prana as the crowd erupted into cheers.

"Then, allow me the first move!"

The first to attack was Kirin.

Clearing the distance between them in a single leap, she swung downward with lightning speed.

Ayato countered with an upward swing before leaping backwards.

Though it had been an incredibly precise attack, Ayato had gained the upper-hand. Even if their weapons clashed directly, they wouldn't break from such force.

Kirin leapt into the air, her sword tracing out an arc as it reversed and came in for a downward slice. The sheer speed of her continuous motion wasn't something that could be looked down upon. As Ayato brought his blade horizontal in a block, Senbakiri's tip suddenly targeted his wrist. Ayato pulled back his arm, though Kirin exploited the opening to suddenly advance and swing mightily.

Her relentless combo pushed Ayato back and had him entirely on the defensive.

Ayato wasn't losing out to her in speed, even when it came to the speed of his strikes.

It was just that her attacks were all flawlessly linked, leaving him without an opportunity to counterattack.

He couldn't afford to get caught up in his opponent's pace. Her gaze, distance, even her breathing - everything about her whispered the temptation that "this is the move you should make". Rejecting that notion, he focused on what was the optimal path for him to take-

"Ku!"

Even if he understood that in his mind, making it happen was another thing altogether.

Forcibly disrupting his own pace would bring about a truly dangerous situation.

(But that's what needs to happen...!)

"!"

In the face of Kirin's godlike speed, Ayato exposed his body.

He immediately felt a searing, burning sensation in his side, but he ignored it, his sword targeting Kirin's chest.

However, she nimbly turned aside, easily avoiding his attack.

Again astonished by her amazing reflexes, he jumped far back to open some distance.

"Haa..."

The wound on his side was quite light.

That said, even if he was reinforcing his body with Prana, victory would perhaps come with quite a price.

Kirin, on the other hand, gazed at Ayato with heartfelt admiration.

"...You really are amazing, Amagiri-senpai. It's as if I were trying to cut a steel wall."

"Well, the quantity of my Prana is one of the few things I do take pride in."

But it wasn't something that would last indefinitely. No matter how vast one's Prana stores were, none of that mattered as long as one was incapable of landing a blow on one's opponent. An opponent with an abundance of experience was even more difficult to deal with; constant reinforcement of one's entire body would quickly exhaust one's resources.

"Moreover, that is the first time anyone's ever managed to escape 'Conjoined Cranes'."^[11]

"So that's what that was. Even I've heard of the 'Conjoined Cranes'; it's quite an honor to experience it firsthand."

The Toudou-style sought after the ideal of the paper crane.

Just as the crane would nimbly flap its wings, the Toudou-style, when properly executed, would unleash a chain of succeeding attacks on its opponent. The embodiment of this ideal was the Toudou-style technique "Conjoined Cranes".

Neither the Amagiri Bright Dragon-style or the Toudou-style forbade contests between different schools, and Ayato himself had personally witnessed the other students vying in such contests on multiple occasions. The Toudou-style boasted many students, but this was the first time Asterisk had witnessed such exquisite swordsmanship.

To this date, Ayato had never before seen anyone who had attained such a degree of mastery over the Toudou-style.

-But now she stood before his very eyes.

"'Returning to Nest', 'Blooming Tachibana', 'Wing-to-Wing', 'Wave of the Blue Sea'...the Toudou-style has 49 variants of chained skills. When linked and taken in aggregate, together they are 'Conjoined Cranes'."

Kirin took up a stance, dropping her center of gravity.

"'Conjoined Cranes' is unending - next time, you won't escape!"

Emitting a whirling aura, she attacked.

Kirin knew of Ayato's time limit. She needed only drag out the match, and victory would be assured.

But it seemed she had no intention of doing so.

(Honestly, she's such a good girl...)

Even though she was younger than he was, not only was her swordsmanship not inferior to his, it was actually superior...just how many hours had she devoted to the sword? What thoughts had run through her mind as she had swung her sword time and time again?

Once more he felt the utmost admiration for the girl before him. Drawing his sword out horizontally, he focused his mind.

Certainly, Kirin's - Toudou-style's - ideology was most impressive.

Their style, which had optimized itself for one-on-one dueling, definitely held the advantage over the Amagiri Bright Dragon-style, which had evolved as a life-and-death necessity on the battlefield.

-Nevertheless.

"Then, allow me to show forth the full might of the Amagiri Bright Dragon-style."

His words finished, with his next breath, his Prana exploded.

Kirin held her sword in a slant, and rushing Ayato, slashed across horizontally.

Ayato blocked, his sword vertical, but Kirin twisted her wrists and slashed down from on high.

Kirin had already entered into "Conjoined Cranes".

An unending sequence of attacks that never ceased until the opponent had been cut.

Since the "Conjoined Cranes" required nonstop motion, it expended an enormous amount of energy. However, Kirin, having practiced day after day, night after night, could sustain it for some time. Until now, the only person to have ever evaded her "Conjoined Cranes" technique had been Ayato alone.

(This time for sure...!)

Last time she'd aimed at his side, but this time her target was his school badge. As long as she did that, his Prana reinforcement would avail him nothing.

It was, of course, extremely difficult to target something like that. However, one aspect of "Conjoined Cranes" was its ability to wear away at the opponent's concentration. Sooner or later, Ayato would show an opening.

And so-

Kirin swung her sword, which crashed loudly against Ayato's.

In the next moment, his sword flashed with light as it flew away.

"Wha...!?"

Immediately following, she was hit by a storm of wind. Covering her face, she leapt backward to clear some distance.

The force with which the explosion hit couldn't be understated.

A moment prior, Kirin had sensed his Prana focusing upon his sword-
(His Meteor Arts failed...?)

In order for Meteor Arts to succeed, in addition to adjustments made to the Lux itself, adjustments to one's Prana output were necessary as well.

Pouring too much Prana into the mana dite would result in an overload resulting in an explosion.

She was certain Ayato would never make such an amateur mistake.

(Don't tell me that was just to interrupt "Conjoined Cranes"...?)

It was a tactic that had definitely achieved its purpose, but wasn't it too self-destructive by far?

Having lost his weapon, he no longer had any means of escaping her attacks.

Determining the current situation in a moment's time, she once more brought up Senbakiri in a stance.

-However.

"Amagiri Bright Dragon-style, spear technique - <Ninth Cloud Wasp>!"

"!"

Penetrating through the gusts created by the explosion, three piercing thrusts came toward Kirin.

"A three-way attack...! No, before that, a spear?!"

Kirin cut herself off and focused her eyes forward.

There stood Ayato, a spear-type Lux gripped in both hands, mist gusting around him.

"Shocked, aren't you? Well, it's a borrowed item, so it's a little too big for me."

Ayato gave a light laugh as he spoke, attacking like lightning.

Kirin quickly recovered and began to deal with his attacks.

Just as Ayato had said, this was a large weapon that was even bigger than he was. The spear's haft extended over two meters, its shining spearhead was larger than his head.

With practiced ease, Ayato pinned down his opponent from a fixed distance.

"...I see. However, even a clever trick is still nothing more than a trick!"

Even given what had just happened, Kirin was still quite calm. Having assessed the situation in a flash, she seized an opening to rebound the haft of the spear.

Although Ayato was certainly skillful with the spear, but his proficiency with the weapon was nowhere near his skill with the sword.

Slipping in beneath the spear's range, she rushed into close quarters, denying the advantage of the longer-reaching spear.

She once again slashed at her target, Ayato's school badge, but she was left utterly shocked.



Ayato had tossed away his spear, and from the sheath on his back, had drawn out a third Lux.

Activating it in a second, it revealed itself as a dagger-type Lux.

"Don't tell me...!"

"-A clever trick has to be clever to count, after all."

Holding the dagger in his left hand, he blocked her attack, and, extending the same motion, whirled in a circle.

"Amagiri Bright Dragon-style, kodachi technique - <Reaper>!"

"Gu!"

Half-instinctively, she swung her blade to meet his, clashing them against one another. Sparks flew from Ayato's dagger as the shock ran through her wrist.

When it came to a contest of sheer strength, she was at a disadvantage.

Kirin quickly came to a decision, deciding to gamble it all on one last thing.

She stopped resisting his blow, instead welcoming his attack. His blade, aimed at her school badge, was thrown awry by the sudden lack of resistance. Kirin barely dodged by turning her body, and she slashed Senbakiri downward once more.

This time, she'd left him no opportunity from which to reveal yet another weapon.

Just as Kirin was sure of her victory - Ayato extended his hand and grabbed her collar.

"Amagiri Bright Dragon-style, grappling technique-"

"Eh...?"

Kirin experienced a feeling of weightlessness before coming to the realization that the world had flipped upside-down.

"- <Sweeping Purification>!"

"!"

In the next instant, she was left winded as the blow simultaneously struck her back and chest, forcing the air from her lungs.

Her face was wracked with pain as she was left unable to breathe, as she finally came to the realization that she'd been thrown.

With tear-filled eyes, she confirmed that the school badge on her chest had been struck dead on by Ayato's technique.

(At the very moment I impacted the ground, his elbow...)

Such a brutal and merciless attack was truly the hallmark of an ancient battle style.

"Are you alright, Toudou-san?"

Ayato watched her in concern as Kirin forced a smile.

A certain indescribable joy welled up within her.

"...I was played. Both the spear and the dagger were just bait, weren't they?"

From the very beginning, his goal had been the throw. For that very reason, he'd allowed her to charge in close.

(The one who got sucked into the opponent's pace was me, wasn't it...)

Kirin understood quite clearly.

The school badge on her chest made a broken sound.

"...It's my loss."

As Kirin acknowledged her loss, the school badge spoke in a mechanical voice, "Match ended! Winner: Amagiri Ayato!"

A brief moment of silence passed before thunderous applause and cheers shook the building.

"I never expected you'd actually win. To be honest, I'm rather surprised."

The rest area of the stadium.

Facing Ayato, seated on the sofa, Julis handed him a drink.

"Haha, I'm pretty surprised myself."

Ayato gave a wry smile as he poured the beverage down his throat.

He had once more been left paralyzed by the aftereffects of breaking the seal, and every inch of his body screamed with pain.

Although during the match, time had felt like it'd stretched, but in reality, it hadn't even lasted five minutes.

After the match, the students of the newspaper club had crowded into the rest area like ants. It'd taken a while before he'd finally had a chance to take a break. They were even now waiting outside, but none of them had personally borne witness to the reapplication of his seal, so there wasn't a problem there.

...Then again, he'd already released his seal in broad daylight on several occasions now; there were undoubtedly students who'd noticed something was strange. It seemed he wouldn't be able to keep this a secret for too much longer.

"In any case, this makes you the new #1...You've really done well."

Julis openly praised him, giving voice to her heartfelt admiration.

"Thank you. Hopefully this fixes things."

"...Fixes things? What're you talking about?"

"The last time I fought, it caused a problem for you, right? At that time, you mentioned that if I was also a Page One, it'd make things easier at the Phoenix."

Julis' eyes opened wide.

"Don't tell me...that's why you accepted the duel?"

"Well, that's not the only reason."

At his words, Julis revealed a gentle smile and patted him on the head.

"Honestly, what am I supposed to do with you..."

Her expression made Ayato's heart thump.

At times, Julis would show forth the kindest, gentlest expressions.

"-*Ahem*."

Deliberately coughing to interrupt the two was Saya.

"Congratulations, Ayato. That was an amazing effort, worthy of my Ayato."

As Saya spoke, she reached an arm to seize ahold of Ayato's wrist.

"Thanks, Saya."

-In the room right now were Ayato, Julis, and Saya, these three.

Claudia had received a call en route, and after leaving her seat, had never returned.

Lester had said "we're not friends" and promptly departed. Eishirou, too, had raced off after the match was over, to prepare his segment for the newspaper club. (Before leaving, however, he, of course, had first made an appointment with Ayato for a special one-on-one interview.)

He'd borrowed a Lux from each of them, and so he had given them his thanks.

"A-anyway, I wasn't aware you had techniques which didn't require a sword. Why didn't you tell me?"

In order to separate Saya and Ayato, Julis had plunged her way in between them.

"Uh, it's not so much that I was hiding it, but rather that I'm not really accustomed to it. I didn't think it was really necessary to bring it up."

"...Only after attaining a certain level of swordsmanship within the Amagiri Bright Dragon-style, do other types of training begin. I know because I'm always watching Ayato."

Pulling Julis away from Ayato, Saya answered.

"Oh, that's right. Yeah, ever since we were young, Saya would watch my sister and I practi- Um...can I ask what it is the two of you are doing?"

Saya and Julis were wrestling with one another, utterly confusing Ayato. Suddenly, he heard a racket being raised outside.

"Ayato, is it alright if I enter?"

The voice that came after knocking politely was one most familiar to him.

"Claudia? Of course, come in."

"Fufu, my apologies for interrupting."

Claudia opened the door and stepped in.

As well as someone else.

"Eh? Toudou-san?"

"U-um, pardon for interrupting."

Standing next to Claudia was Kirin, an uncertain expression on her face.

"On the way over, I noticed she'd been caught by the newspaper club, so I brought her with me."

"T-thank you so much!"

Kirin bowed and expressed her thanks to Claudia.

"It's nothing, it's nothing. You probably had something you wanted to say; that's why you came all this way, right?"

"Ah...yes, that's right."

At Claudia's prompting, Kirin turned to Ayato.

"How can I help you, Toudou-san?"

Julis and Saya similarly turned to Kirin, curiosity plain on their faces.

As all eyes turned on her, Kirin shrunk timidly. Drawing in a deep breath, however, she shouted aloud.

"U-um, Amagiri-senpai, can I join in on your training too?"

"Huh?"

Everyone was struck dumb at the unexpected question.

"W-well, last time you offered, I had to turn you down, but this time..."

Kirin's face burned scarlet as she trembled.

"Ayato, what's this? I haven't heard anything about that."

Julis' glare pierced through Ayato as he frantically explained.

"N-no, um, it's just that, if Toudou-san were to join us, wouldn't that increase the variety of our training?"

"That does make sen-"

"No problem at all. Welcome."

Saya extended her hands in welcome as Julis roared.

"Why are you the one answering?! Or rather, you've been coming every day since then, but I don't remember ever giving you permission!"

"Riessfeld, you sure get caught up in the little things. The world changes; get used to it."

"If anything's changing, it's because you're destroying it, you fool!"

The two began to argue once more as Ayato shrugged.

"This kind of thing happens all the time; you okay with that?"

"A-absolutely!"

"I understand. Then-"

Ayato extended his hand to the emphatically nodding Kirin as more noise came from outside.

"Kirin! You're here, aren't you? Come out, Kirin! Open this door!"

Realizing the door was locked, a violent roar shook the room.

"Oh my, if it isn't Toudou-dono."

Standing in front of the door, Claudia held her palm to her cheek with a frown on her face.

Her expression seemingly inquired of the other members of the room as to the best course of action.

Ayato couldn't decide such a thing by himself.

He turned to Kirin, who bit her lips before summoning up her courage and nodding.

"Right then...Claudia?"

"Got it."

Claudia opened the door, and Kouichirou came charging through the doorway with a face like an angry bull.

"Kirin, just how stupid can you get?! Not only did you initiate a duel without my permission, you even lost! My plan's all wasted!"

He'd only just opened his mouth, but the air already thundered with his rage.

"In any case, now you understand! You need me! Now, come! Do what I say!"

He grabbed ahold of her wrist, but she shook him off.

"...I'm sorry, Uncle."

She spoke but this one sentence before meeting his gaze.

Her eyes revealed the careful consideration she'd undertaken, but in his furious state, Kouichirou had long since lost the ability to take note of such things.

"Shut up! SHUT UP, SHUT UP, SHUT UP! All you need to do is listen to me!"

Utterly enraged, he raised an arm.

But as his arm prepared to come swinging down, he suddenly stiffened.

Ayato had appeared between the two of them, glaring fiercely at Kouichirou.

"-This is unsightly. Please control yourself."

"W-what did you say, you brat..."

In the face of Ayato's calm demeanor, his roar faded into a whisper.

The look in Ayato's eyes was like a drawn blade. The murderous feeling conveyed by those eyes made his blood run cold.

Kouichirou felt a deep and instinctual fear run through him. His face turned ashen and he began to shake.

"She's already decided to step forward of her own accord. There's no room left here for you."

"Amagiri-senpai..."

From out of the corner of Kirin's mouth, Ayato's name leaked.

"I see. You're even more contemptible than the rumors say."

"...This is disgusting."

Julis stood behind Ayato with her arms folded, looking down upon Kouichirou with distaste.

Saya activated her Lux.

"Y-you bastards...I-I'm not a member of the Starpulse Generation, you know? If you dare to so much as harm a hair on my head-"

Kouichirou was unable to hide his fear, and his voice trembled as he spoke. Finally, a light bulb going off in his head, he turned to Kirin.

"T-that's right! Listen up, Kirin! I was the one who covered up your father's crimes! If you don't return to my side, I'll reveal everything! In that way, both you and the Toudou-style will..."

"-Hmm? I seem to have heard something most interesting."

Speaking over Kouichirou's voice was someone who had remained silent until just now - Claudia.

"What?! E-Enfield..."

Taking notice of Claudia for the first time, his eyes opened wide.

"I have no intention of criticizing the relationship between you and Toudou-san. However, when it comes to 'Toudou Kirin's reputation' - that's not something that belongs only to you."

Claudia revealed an elegant smile, but her eyes were ice cold.

"That belongs to Seidokan Academy - to the Integrated Enterprise Foundation. If you plan to destroy it...I'm afraid I won't be able to turn a blind eye to such actions."

"Uh, ugh..."

Kouichirou's erratic breathing was his only answer.

"I think my father would likely agree with me, but what do you think?"

"T-that's..."

"Originally your plan was predicated on the premise of an undefeated Toudou-san claiming victory at the Festa. That plan is already destroyed...If I were you, I'd let her go, for my own safety."

Unable to rebut her suggestion, his shoulders drooped.

Quietly, and lifelessly, he proceeded to make his way out of the room.

"U-Uncle!"

Kirin shouted at his back.

Kouichirou stopped, but didn't turn.

"Uncle, I am very grateful for all you've done. That's not a lie. For everything until now...thank you very much!"

This was Kirin's way of life, and the way she treated everyone. Once more, bowing with respect, she expressed her thanks.

"..."

Kouichirou didn't respond, nor did he turn back, he simply continued on his way and exited.

"Uncle..."

As Kirin showed a sorrowful expression, Ayato took her hand.

At that warm, gentle touch, she turned to Ayato with an expression half-laughing, half-tearful.

"I'll be in your care from now on, Toudou-san."

"...Yes. Thank you so much."

Wiping away her tears, she nodded lightly.

"Honestly...there's no helping it."

"And that's that."

"Hehe...how wonderful."

The tense air in the room vanished.

Kirin looked around, and spoke to Ayato in a trembling voice.

"U-um...Amagiri-senpai?"

"Yes? What's up?"

"W-well, there's still one last thing...or rather, I have a couple requests to make. Would you hear me out?" Kirin, blushing to her ears, whispered quietly.

"Requests?"

"Y-yeah. I-if you wouldn't mind, could I call you by your name?"

A whisper so quiet as to be almost imperceptible.

"Is that it? Of course you can. What's the other thing?"

"W-well, um, Ayato-senpai..."

"Yes?"

Kirin's head, still bowed, shyly looked up. Resolving herself, she finally spoke.

"...W-would...would you also call me by my name?"

Now that was a little surprising.

He had no reason to refuse though.

Ayato laughed and nodded.

"No problem at all - Kirin-chan."

Epilogue

"Shit, how can something like this exist?!"

"-It's not working?!"

-Allekant Academy, subterranean research division.

Two youths, one gripping a sword-type Lux, the other a rifle-type Lux, glared at the object in front of them, utterly vexed.

Smoke filled the air before them.

The Lux weapons the youths were holding in their hands were the newest, high-performing, models produced by Ferrovius. Moreover, the students in question were ferocious individuals whose names could be found on the Named Charts.

They had been highly ranked at the previous Phoenix, but sheer disbelief colored their faces now.

No, rather than disbelief, it should be said that they refused to believe the scene before their eyes.

The shadow amidst the smoke wavered as two beams of light flashed, like the shining eyes of a demon.

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

The subterranean area rang out with the screams of the two.

Without bothering to watch the end, Ernesta closed the window before her. Both the image and audio disappeared, and the room once more left the two girls with an atmosphere of dark silence.

"...Well, that's more or less the state of things. What do you think, Camilla? Although there are still some final adjustments to be made, but it's not bad, right?"

Ernesta spun her chair, a light smile of pride on her face.

"Mind if I speak frankly?"

"Feel free."

"-This isn't the first time I've felt that you're a truly terrifying person."

Camilla said, her face smiling.

"Hehehe, if you ask me, that's the greatest compliment!"

Ernesta blushed and smiled, her eyes brimming with self-confidence.

"But still, be careful not to push Ferrovius too far. They have plenty of combat-oriented students; they're not an opponent to take lightly."

"Don't worry about it! I'm taking it pretty easy on them."

Ernesta revealed a guileless smile.

"In any case...with this, victory at the Phoenix isn't just a dream."

"Of course! That's the goal, after all. The only thing that might derail things a bit would be if Tenorio were to raise a fuss."

Besides the window that had closed earlier, several others of similar size were hovering in the air. Ernesta called one of them to her.

The screen revealed an image of Ayato and Ser-Vesta, slaying the giant dragon.

"Hehe, that really was quite impressive. Quite fascinating indeed."

Nodding in emphasis, Ernesta enlarged the window. The screen's display wasn't limited to just an image, however, as it simultaneously displayed a list of numbers and charts.

The collected data was beyond precious.

"With this failure, Tenorio will have no choice but to shut up. Moreover, you didn't have to lift a finger in collecting this data; what a perfect example of killing two birds with one stone."

"No, no. I just happened to win my gamble, is all," Ernesta replied, a carefree expression on her face.

"If I continue to gamble like this, seizing every chance I get, there's no way I can lose!"

"Is that what you really believe?"

"Personal philosophy, more like."

Ernesta extended her hand in the direction of another window.

It revealed the scene of Ayato and Kirin, dueling in the gymnasium. Some Seidokan student had recorded the event and posted it online.

"Now if we could just get our hands on that person's data, there'd be nothing to worry about. Oh well, there's no changing the fact that it's beyond our reach to install our data collectors on the grounds of another school."

As she spoke, she reached out to close the window with her finger.

"Now then, students of Seidokan and Allekant, work hard on my behalf, won't you?"

Ernesta rose from her chair and bid a loud farewell.

"-Now the curtain on the true show is about to rise. Please accompany me to the very end."

Ernesta's face bore a lofty look.

Camilla sat stunned for a brief moment before breaking into open applause for her dear friend.

"...That reminds me, Toudou."

"Hmm? Is something the matter, Sasamiya-senpai?"

The practice room, after school.

Ayato, Julis, Saya, and Kirin; today was the first joint practice for the four.

Speaking to Kirin, who'd already changed, Saya suddenly opened her mouth.

"I heard that you're fighting for your father's sake...is that true?"

"Y-yes. That's true," Kirin answered nervously.

Saya folded her arms and nodded.

"So that's how it is. That's wonderful, wonderful indeed."

"Is that so..."

"The truth is, my situation is the same as yours. I'm doing this for my dad."

"Oh?"

Saya met Kirin's surprised eyes, her usual blank expression on her face.

"I have a proposal for you."

"...P-proposal?" Kirin asked uneasily.

Saya answered unworriedly.

"How would you like to team up with me?"

References

1. ↑ [Elnath](#), a.k.a. Beta Tauri
2. ↑ This is in the original Japanese source, but the author made a mistake here. He clearly states that Claudia met five pairs of eyes earlier, which is impossible as Queen Veil's student council president is absent.
3. ↑ A reference to the [owl of Athena](#), the Greek goddess of wisdom.
4. ↑ [Fire wheels](#)
5. ↑ [Ereshkigal](#) (the furigana is slightly off, for more detail, please reference the [[Talk:Gakusen Toshi Asterisk:Volume2 Chapter2|talk page]]).
6. ↑ A reference to [Shakespeare](#)
7. ↑ [Nihontou](#) actually refers to a category of weapons; precisely which one Kirin uses the author leaves unclear, so I've left this as is.
8. ↑ The author does a subtle wordplay here that really doesn't translate. Kirin's nickname is 疾風刃雷 [しっぷうじんらい] - "gusting wind, bladed thunder" (more or less). There is a Japanese phrase which has an identical pronunciation, but differs by only one kanji: 疾風迅雷. This phrase means to do something "with lightning speed". I believe the author intends for Kirin's nickname to carry the connotation of both.
9. ↑ Two shaku, three sun, and four bu, to be precise.
10. ↑ This is likely the only time I'll ever transliterate a name instead of translating it outright. Nonetheless, the translation of this sword's name is just too atrocious for words. Its name in kanji is "千羽切", which literally translates to "thousand birds sliced". Terrible, isn't it?
11. ↑ [Renzuru](#)

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